

# WE LEARN

## Letting go is hard, retaining talent may be harder

A guide to navigating your workforce  
in the face of Covid-19



# WE LEARN

**WE** is a learning solutions and workforce development company focused on changing the way in which organizations use learning to achieve their best outcome.

## WeLearn partners with organizations to:

- embed workforce development into their organizational DNA and to find and identify new sources of talent for the roles they need to fill.
- deploy new ways of reskilling and upskilling their current employees to build greater talent mobility and to ensure they have an engaged committed pool of talent.
- ensure learning is deployed as a strategic benefit to their employees and driving to organizational outcomes.
- make their most inspired learning ideas come by creating and delivering current, relevant, beautiful, and engaging learning solutions.

WeLearn does this to enable both organizations and their employees to **grow and flourish** in the competitive marketplace.

Learn more at [www.WeLearnLS.com](http://www.WeLearnLS.com)

This paper was developed with support from Paper Crane Associates, a consulting firm which helps mission-driven organizations launch, grow, and pivot.

## Forward

2020 has challenged us to reexamine life as we know it.

Due to Covid-19, tens of millions of Americans are out of work. For those still working, resilience and adaptability has been building as people quickly adapt to new technologies and navigate work/life balance as never before. The global economy is uncertain and business leaders are strategizing how to move forward. If there ever was a playbook for success, the rules have all changed. Will our employees' skills remain relevant as everything shifts? Has technology plus Covid-19 led to new market conditions that require rethinking our entire business model? Are some industries forever disrupted? So many questions, yet no concrete answers. Leaning on my experience and intuition, I do know one thing is certain; companies need to renegotiate their contract with their employees, potential employees and the communities they work in. Yes, it means all eyes are searching for examples of leadership that can take us through this process.

At the heart of coping with these challenging decisions are executives and HR professionals. Employees are hoping for a grand plan, a plan with job security and stable income, but that is easier said than done. Executives and business owners need to take short-term steps for their workforce now to prepare for long-term business success. This plan will have a lasting impact on our staff, our reputation, and culture. This is a delicate process and it is fraught with uncertainty.

With so much in the air, there may not be a clear 'right' next step. The words of reputation and expert, speaker, and author [Mike Mooney](#) recently inspired me as I think about this moment:



In these days of immense shifts, we have to be prepared to step into the places where we may feel woefully unprepared. We need to step in. We need to show up. We need to give ourselves the grace to know that we will be exactly what is needed in that moment - nothing more, nothing less. And, in that moment, we will be what others need, too - whether that be by our words or merely by stepping in and showing up.

## Forward

I believe that this moment calls for leaders who demonstrate courage, compassion, and commitment. If you have to let employees go, what's the least painful way to do so? How do you send a message of perseverance to the remaining staff? What actions can you take to put your organization ahead of the curve in the Covid-19 recovery economy?

This article explores these concepts and offers concrete examples and next steps.

- **First**, in looking at lay-off practices, this whitepaper suggests several pathways of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is important to maintaining morale, but also impacts the business reputation and future talent pipeline. An organization that handles the transition well can increase productivity among remaining employees, mitigate ill-will from those who are leaving, and connect with consumers who increasingly value supporting businesses with ethical values.
- **Second**, this whitepaper highlights the resources that can be used to implement adaptive workforce development. Given the changing landscape, staying afloat requires cultivating opportunities for workers to grow resilience and build new skills. Building capacity helps increase success for individual employees as well as the holistic organization. WeLearn is a fantastic resource that partners with organizations to develop unique learning and development strategies that want to cultivate a culture of Learning and help prepare organizations and staff to propel forward.

Whether you are thinking about today, tomorrow, next year, or next decade, the skills enumerated in these pages can help set your people up for success. Smart leadership is required to make it through to the other side of this pandemic. How do we do this? I say pause, take a breath, and keep sight of a whole picture where today's actions can support both people and the business, in the short and the long term, in this unprecedented time of transition.

Sincerely,

**Joy Joseph**

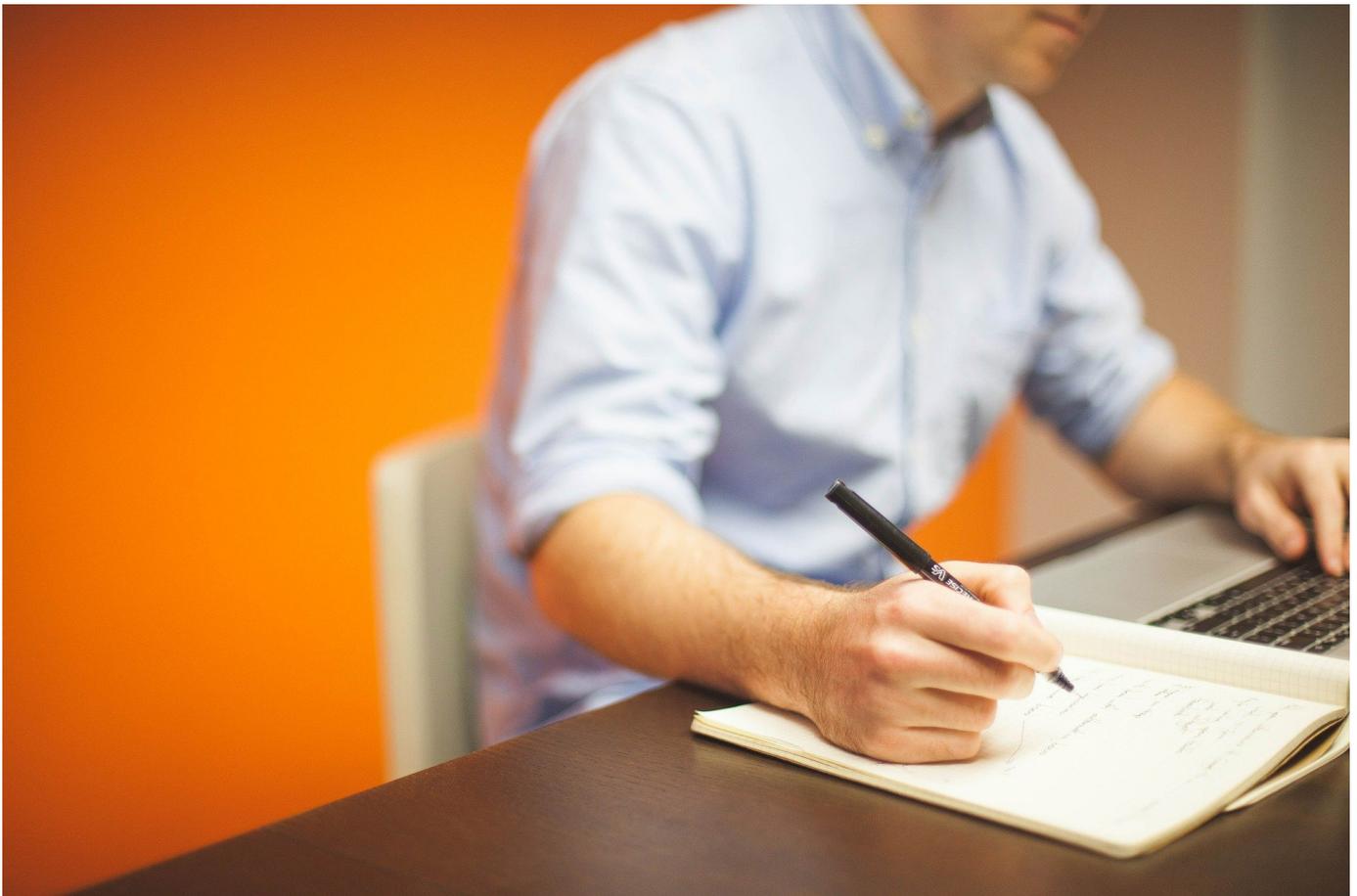
**Human Capital Leader**

*Former Chief Diversity Officer, Head of Culture,  
Engagement, and Employer Branding AXA*

## Current moment: ethical leadership is needed

As of this writing in the Covid-19 era, **more than 40 million individuals** have filed for unemployment and millions more haven't yet been able to file. Unfortunately, it appears that this number may be growing. As downsizing seemingly becomes inevitable at the moment, it is more important than ever for companies to make a clear compelling statement to promote employee well-being as part of the organization's core ethos.<sup>1</sup>

Today's actions are crucial to organizations' long-term success. HR leaders and executives need to collaborate and pay careful attention to how lay-offs are handled and how remaining employees are supported. This pandemic is an opportunity for businesses to differentiate through impactful leadership and develop learning pathways that strengthen staff capabilities. Covid-19 has challenged business leaders to do three things at once: stage the return to work, understand and leverage the advancements they enacted during the crisis, and chart a new path forward.<sup>2</sup> Ethical leadership is more than 'good policy'. Due to the changing consumer landscape, thinking about employee well-being is a business imperative.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Inspired by <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/corporate-leadership/resource-better-approach-layoffs/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/covid-19-and-the-future-of-work.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/corporate-leadership/corporate-action-platform/become-impact-employer/>

# You have the power to make a bad situation a little better

For many businesses, layoffs are an inevitable reality.

Some industries have been harder hit than others<sup>4</sup> and need to rethink their business models. This paper offers suggestions on how to minimize the pain points involved with transition and layoffs. These actions are important for the workers who leave, the workers who stay, and the greater outside community. Inspired by the outline in the JFF report<sup>5</sup>, here are some practical suggestions to reduce the emotional costs:

## Offer choices wherever possible

The possibility to offer options that provide some control over next steps might improve overall workplace morale. If offered, some older employees may choose to take early retirement, some may prefer a generous severance package. Each company needs to come up with its own recipe that works (% percentage of employees, \$ of severance). However, providing workers with the option to voluntarily leave could ease feelings of ill will towards management.

These calculations to determine the right balance of remaining employees are easier said than done, but if mastered will be as much of a win-win situation that a bad reality can yield. [Additional challenges include what needs to happen if not enough or too many employees elect a voluntary exit. To address this, the business should have a plan in place prior to offering options to employees. Plans may include a cap from each department, mandatory criteria for consideration, and a tiered model that could be adjusted to the number of years worked.]

Alternatively, organizations can work with employees to find volunteers to reduce hours, which may be particularly attractive for employees juggling children who are remote learning instead of in-school. If a business can weather this storm in the months ahead, having trained staff who will be available to increase back to full time is much better than losing all of those skills from their workforce. Research has consistently shown that finding and training replacement employees is an expensive process. Furloughing, while sometimes a necessary option, can create ill-will towards the company and, especially now, a feeling of uncertainty. Through creating models where workers can stay on part time, it shows a commitment to the long-term relationship between employee and employer. Having some certainty of work and skin-in-the-game in terms of the business's success will encourage employees to produce high quality work, and creates a sense of comradery which is important to employee morale.

<sup>4</sup> <https://joshbersin.com/2020/05/the-unemployment-report-economic-transformation-before-our-eyes/>

<sup>5</sup> inspired by <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/corporate-leadership/resource-better-approach-layoffs/>

# You have the power to make a bad situation a little better

## Build goodwill

While laying off valued employees may be necessary, honoring each employee's value will go a long way. If your organization doesn't already have some act of recognition, consider implementing one. This can include a zoom thank you send off or an internal company email to 'publicly' thank them for their accomplishments. Be careful not to send mixed messages as to why such a valued employee is being let go, rather try to preserve their dignity so staff can leave the company with their head held high. An email highlighting accomplishments can also serve as useful evidence when people are applying to new jobs.

Going a step further, if you are laying off valued employees, make it clear that the relationships are not terminated, but the positions are being terminated at this time. In order to support their future success, it is good practice to offer to be a reference for a next job. If the offer is genuine, be clear that you want them to succeed in the future and would be happy to assist them in their professional journey. This can abate the sting of a lay-off as well as minimize the likelihood that employees will sue the company down the line.<sup>6</sup>

## Ensure as smooth a transition process

Transitioning out of a steady job in an uncertain economy with unknown future challenges is a difficult situation. Don't make the process any more stressful than it needs to be. While many companies have a comprehensive onboarding process, most do not have a comparable offboarding process - especially for large numbers of layoffs or for staff who are working remotely. HR professionals should have a clear process to go through so the layoff process can be completed in an empathetic, thorough, and flawless manner.

To ensure these qualities, HR departments should have materials that clearly answer the most pressing questions outgoing employees will have. These are practical questions such as how to file for unemployment, how long will health insurance coverage last post-termination, and what to expect with pay-outs of benefits such as sick leave. Whether or not employees know to ask the questions, HR should be prepared to walk through this transition with ease and clarity. If new questions come up in the offboarding, HR representatives should be ready to answer in a timely manner. Every task which can expedite the process for filing forms and managing benefits should be done with alacrity. If it is preventable for former employees to have a gap in coverage, HR should be working with them to ensure as secure a transition as possible. These steps can neutralize an otherwise negative experience.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/corporate-leadership/resource-better-approach-layoffs/>

# You have the power to make a bad situation a little better

## Cultivate a community network

A company is often based in a specific location, though Covid-19 is accelerating the trend of remote offices. For businesses with physical locations and employees who live nearby, there is an opportunity to cultivate relationships with local community organizations. This can be done on an ongoing basis through volunteerism, recruitment methods, and educational partnerships. One benefit of building such a network is that people share opportunities. If someone who is laid off can be connected with a non-profit who might need additional support, it helps build goodwill as well as numerous other benefits. Workers can build up their skills and networks through volunteering, which helps fill a time gap on their resume, but also build their network for future opportunities.

Knowing the local network may also help employers connect workers with time-sensitive opportunities that utilize their skills. For example, the People+Work Connect Initiative is an example of companies getting together to help “swap” jobs that require similar human skills. This is possible in situations like when a housekeeper loses their job at a hotel, they can quickly take up a similar role in a hospital.<sup>7</sup> Building these networks takes work, but the relationships usually last longer than individual employees. They also help create public good will for the companies involved.

## In summary

When workers are treated with respect, that sentiment pervades throughout the organization. It makes outgoing employees less bitter, which reduces the likelihood of a lawsuit, but also has greater impacts on the business’s reputation. It affects how future talent will be attracted to the company, as well as the growing number of consumers who use ethical metrics as a core value in purchasing decisions.<sup>8</sup>

Goodwill also extends to the current employees. If layoffs are done poorly, it can engender a distrust of management. This can lead to a decreased willingness-to-work in the short term. In the long term, this decrease in overall loyalty could increase the likelihood workers who remain will leave the business when they get a chance. Layoffs may be inevitable, but *how* a business acts with layoff may be the difference between organizations that can make it out on top and those which don’t. It is time to build internal policies that demonstrate dignified and compassionate leadership for workers.

<sup>7</sup> <https://joshbersin.com/2020/05/the-unemployment-report-economic-transformation-before-our-eyes/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.5wpr.com/new/research/5wpr-2020-consumer-culture-report/>

## Focusing on those who **remain**

Covid-19 has highlighted how unpredictable curveballs can shake up business as usual. Some industries will be permanently disrupted by this pandemic and others are trying to adapt as fast as possible to remain afloat.<sup>9</sup> To be successful for the unknown, organizations need to build capabilities in work resilience to meet rapidly changing landscapes.<sup>10</sup> Given the shifts in the world economy, new challenges face your remaining staff. It may be inheriting the largest tasks of former colleagues, balancing the new working from home lifestyle, or working on projects without a clear understanding of their trajectory. To lead in employee well-being requires attention and investment on preparing your workforce for these situations. We recommend that you invest now to keep your employees engaged and on the cutting edge.

Most employers know that workforce development is the key for retaining talent. However, it is more important than just retaining talent. The right workforce development can build adaptive skills in critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. According to Deloitte's Human Capital 2020 Trends report, these skills are needed for business success as economies are shifting out of an age of production and into an age of imagination.<sup>11</sup>

Your investment in workforce development creates a more engaged employee and one who will better be able to contribute to your changing company and changing world. An engaged employee is committed to the quality of the products and services provided. This drives customer brand loyalty and increased spending. It also better prepares your business to be agile in responding to the unknown. So, what exactly does top-notch workforce development look like and how can businesses engage in these actions?



<sup>9</sup> <https://joshbersin.com/2020/05/the-unemployment-report-economic-transformation-before-our-eyes/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/reskilling-the-workforce-to-be-resilient.html>

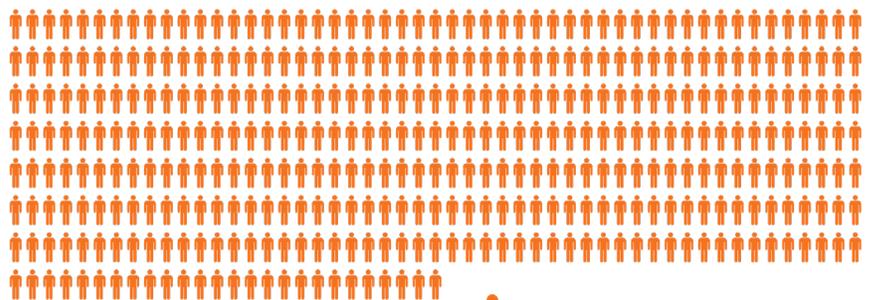
<sup>11</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/reskilling-the-workforce-to-be-resilient.html>

## Current landscape of workforce development

Almost every organization has some form of training and development and over 80% of organizations have educational assistance or tuition assistance programs. That sounds impressive, however most of these programs and policies have historically been under-utilized. Additionally, they are usually not aligned with strategic development of employees to advance in the organization. While the market has seen big employers, such as Amazon, Walmart, Disney, and Starbucks, innovate the ways in which these benefits are offered to employees, we have yet to see the sea change needed for organizations to compete in the new world of work.

Automation and artificial intelligence are in the process of changing the workforce as we know it. Each new report that comes out has more staggering statistics as to how employee skills will need to shift just to keep pace. According to a recent McKinsey Global Institute Report, as many as 375 million workers may need to switch their occupations in response to “digitization, automation, and advances in artificial intelligence.”<sup>12</sup> Fifty-three percent of respondents in a Deloitte 2020 Global Human Capital Trends Survey said that between half and all of their workforce will need to change their skills and capabilities in the next three years.<sup>13</sup>

**375 million**  
workers may need to switch their occupations in response to “digitization, automation, and advances in artificial intelligence.”<sup>12</sup>



 = 1 million persons



**53%**

of respondents in a Deloitte 2020 Global Human Capital Trends Survey said that between **half** and **all** of their workforce will need to change their skills and capabilities in the next **three years**<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/retraining-and-reskilling-workers-in-the-age-of-automation>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/reskilling-the-workforce-to-be-resilient.html>

# The **cost of inaction** and falling behind the curve

In this Covid-19 time, investing in workforce development may seem like a hard sell but this is the exact moment in which those investments can pay significant dividends. So much else is going on and many businesses are trying to survive, let alone thrive. But times are changing whether we want them to or not. Inaction may lead businesses to fall so far behind, catching up may be impossible. Estimates show recruiting new talent costs as high as 150% of an employee's salary while reskilling a current employee costs less than 10% of their salary.

Beyond being cheaper to reskill than to rehire, workforce development also directly affects employee retention, motivation, engagement, and productivity. According to a JFF report, "Companies with advanced talent development capabilities have revenue growth rates and profit margins that are more than twice as high as those with less advanced talent development programs."<sup>14</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, people were leaving their jobs at higher rates than ever because of a lack of career development. This trend is predicted to continue after Covid-19 recovery. Lack of workforce development is the single largest preventable cause of voluntary turnover.<sup>15</sup> Organizations restructuring their tuition/education assistance policies as lifelong learning policies provide the opportunities for their employees to leverage these benefits to reskill, upskill, or even outskill. By shifting these policies and programs, not only are organizations embedding workforce development in their DNA, but they are also communicating that lifelong learning is a cornerstone of their employee value proposition. In addition, for employees who are not working at full capacity given the Covid-19 and economic situations, this is the ideal time to help them take advantage of opportunities to reskill, upskill, or outskill. This positions both the employee and employer to be in a strong place as the Covid-19 and economic situations move into their next chapter.

The benefits of good workforce development are clear. Reskilling current employees saves costs and builds a stronger, more engaged, longer lasting work force. However, many businesses report that the greatest barrier to taking this step is identifying the right needs and priorities to develop. There is an art to identifying which learning opportunities are the right fit for your business. As reputation expert Mike Mooney says, "This is the time for leaders and organizations to step into the places for which they feel woefully unprepared." Given that resources are tight, you want to make sure you are making best choices for your business.

Let WeLearn help you.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/corporate-leadership/corporate-action-platform/become-impact-employer/>

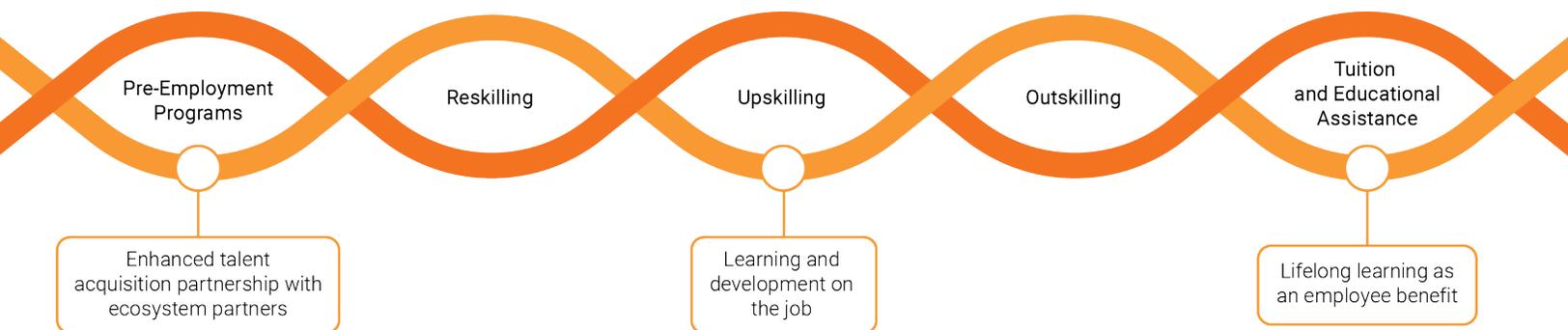
<sup>15</sup> [https://trainingindustry.com/blog/workforce-development/how-to-address-employee-turnover-a-strategic-solution-for-employers-and-higher-education-providers/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=trainingindustry&utm\\_source=linkedin](https://trainingindustry.com/blog/workforce-development/how-to-address-employee-turnover-a-strategic-solution-for-employers-and-higher-education-providers/?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=trainingindustry&utm_source=linkedin)

# WeLearn can help companies to offer superior workforce development

WeLearn is a learning solutions and workforce development company focused on changing the way in which organizations use learning to achieve their best outcome. We partner with organizations on how to offer developmental opportunities to individuals whose jobs are impacted by organizational change. This approach helps deploy new ways of reskilling and upskilling current employees to build greater talent capacity.

Our approach is based on our experience in working with the various stakeholders in the educational ecosystem. We created the Organizational DNA Model for Workforce Development which proposes that workforce development become embedded into the organization, guided by both the organization's strategies and its culture.

## Our Organizational DNA Model a model for workforce development



Using the Organizational DNA model, organizations can begin to provide answers to the following questions:

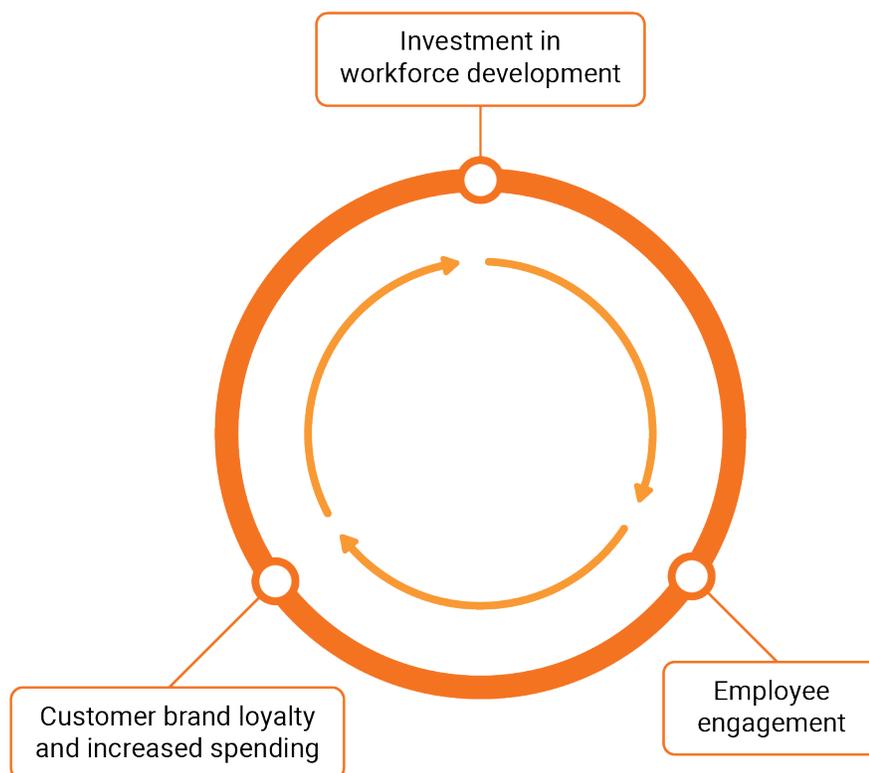
- How do I move employees into new/emerging areas of my workforce in order to maintain our competitive advantage?
- How do I provide a pathway for employees whose jobs may be impacted by automation, technology, Covid-19, or the economic downturn?
- How can I opportunistically and strategically use downtime for learning and development?
- What is the implication to our brand if we do this well?
- What is the implication if we don't?

# WeLearn can help companies to offer superior workforce development

## A holistic approach

How an organization answers these training questions is increasingly becoming a major factor in how their brand is viewed by employees, potential employees, their supply chain, the communities they work in, and their shareholders. Creating and executing a comprehensive and sustainable workforce development strategy requires moving beyond and working through the boundaries of your organization. The larger the organization in terms of employees, geography, and scale of change in the workplace, the more complex managing this type of strategy is in terms of ecosystem engagement, stakeholder management, and measurement of outcomes and key performance indicators.

Your **investment** in workforce development creates a more engaged **employee**. An engaged employee is committed to the quality of the products and services provided. This drives **customer** brand loyalty and increased spending.



## Diving in deeper

Though the full Organizational DNA model comprises components of enhanced talent acquisition, learning and development, and learning as an employee benefit, in addressing this unique moment, we want to focus on WeLearn's approach to learning and development.

### WeLearn's approach to learning and development

While there are many components to basic learning and development (i.e. compliance training, sales training, and management development), there are three areas that are crucial when it comes to the Organizational DNA Model: reskilling, upskilling, and outskilling. Reskilling is training employees to acquire new or improved skills for a different role. For example, a cafeteria worker in a healthcare organization who transitions to the clinical pathway by training to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. Upskilling builds upon and refines existing skills for their existing job, for example, providing data analytics training to build the skills of a marketing team. Outskilling provides training to pursue a new job or career path outside of the organization. While seemingly counterintuitive, this helps build the reputation of an organization as a feeder for talent. It also helps recruit top candidates who know that their time in the organization will build their skills, leading to a higher quality workforce.

Applying these strategies inside the organization will allow the organization to optimize the internal talent pipeline and reduce the cost of filling positions. By shifting these policies and programs, not only are organizations embedding workforce development in their DNA, but they are also communicating that lifelong learning is a cornerstone of their employee value proposition. We believe that fundamentally embracing workforce development is good for organizations and drives not only organizational results – but ultimately employee engagement and retention.

WeLearn can help the most complex organizations roll out a targeted workforce development strategy. Whether program or individual focused, our experienced practitioners have developed tools focused on building employee skills. We understand the unique needs of adult learners and can create the bridge to link learning and work. Let us help you strengthen your employee capability, especially as the economy is bracing for an unknown future.

## In Summary

We know what makes good business stand out: **good leadership**, **good work**, and **good people**.

While Covid-19 has presented challenges to reimagining these categories, we know some concrete steps that will help businesses navigate through these tough times. A work-force centric employer will be thinking about what steps they can take to best prepare their employee and their business for the unknown challenges ahead. Through building clear learning pathways and developing capacities of resilience, business leaders today can invest in the right tools that will set up their organization to succeed.

# WE LEARN

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