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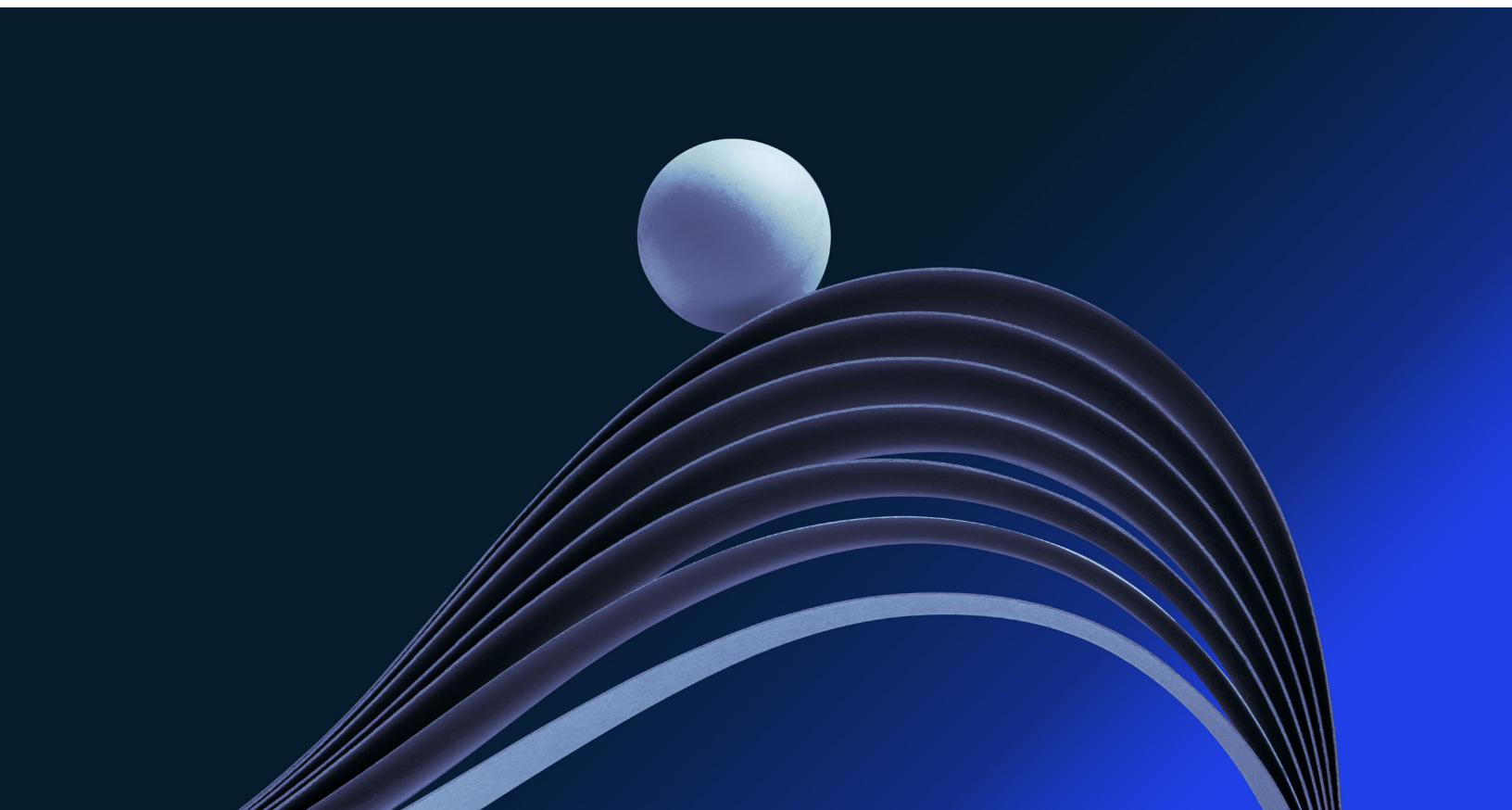
Scaling rapid workforce conversion during COVID-19

Amid crisis disruption or when preparing for the next normal, quickly delivering practical, flexible learning can help shape a business's recovery profile. Here's how.

by Alex Camp, Karen Henke, and Marc Metakis

On the uncertain path to recovery from the coronavirus crisis, one thing is beyond doubt: a company's ability to quickly pivot to a new way of working will be critical for preparing for the next normal. Some companies have already demonstrated that agility in a lifesaving way, such as carmakers that have shifted to building ventilators and toy makers producing hand sanitizer.

These pivots will continue, compounded by the need to restart work in a dramatically changed context—and, increasingly, for workers facing new responsibilities. Consider the retail employees or security teams at once-crowded malls, who must learn how to interact with the public in safe and responsible ways, or flight attendants implementing new safety protocols. Think also of the health inspectors and construction workers who must enforce and comply with new regulations.

Still others will experience full-scale job change as their roles take on ever-more essential meaning in public life. Small armies of people will be needed to clean public areas to a new standard of safety or trace the path of the virus, to produce testing kits, to administer and process tests, and to read and communicate test results to millions of people around the world. The pandemic is changing public life, and millions of workers will learn new skills, in new ways, in response to the changing landscape.

The challenge is even greater when speed is essential: many workers will need to take on new responsibilities or new jobs within a matter of days or weeks. But it is possible to make rapid-scale workforce transformations to meet new demands and needs. Businesses—of all sizes—that are able to convert employee skills in a practical, fast, and scalable way can find in this new approach a backbone of recovery from the crisis.

Scaling rapid workplace conversion

In the context of the pandemic, consider the task of enabling a workforce to complete one task or a very small set of tasks. These might be part of their current job or perhaps a new one designed in response to COVID-19. The skills needed might have to be learned in a very short period of time— perhaps days—to meet an urgent, unexpected need. It's thus vitally important to identify specific micro tasks that must be completed immediately, and then offer targeted learning and support so people can begin working on them quickly. It's possible to add a broader range of skills later, as needed, but the immediate goal is to identify and address the most pressing pain points the organization is facing.

The financial-services industry provides a timely illustrative example of the art of the possible. Once the United States Congress created the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in response to the devastating effects of COVID-19 on small businesses, institutions had only a few days to train teams of bankers, loan processors, underwriters, and loan "closers" to manage loans related to the program. Bank employees needed to answer complex questions about the program. They also needed to learn where to find and how to complete the forms required to process loans, often while working from home.

Moreover, it was necessary to verify the information provided by applicants, to communicate with anxious and emotional business owners, and to perform other tasks. Although complications emerged that hampered the efforts of small-business owners to get the loans they so desperately needed, the experience also illustrated a need that will only become more persistent as companies of all sizes cope with and emerge from the COVID-19 crisis: How can management rapidly onboard and train employees to perform critical, time-sensitive tasks at scale?

Effective rapid-scale workplace conversion must focus on learners' needs. That requires the learning leaders shaping such programs to adopt the perspective of employees.

A checklist for rapid learning at scale

Faced with an existential human and business crisis, ad hoc and informal workplace skills conversion is doubtless already underway at organizations all over the world. Unfortunately, an ad hoc approach is replete with risk: in the absence of adequate business support, employees will be unable to learn and perform new jobs. Particularly in the current environment of both economic and public-health risks, the consequences of missteps could be devastating.
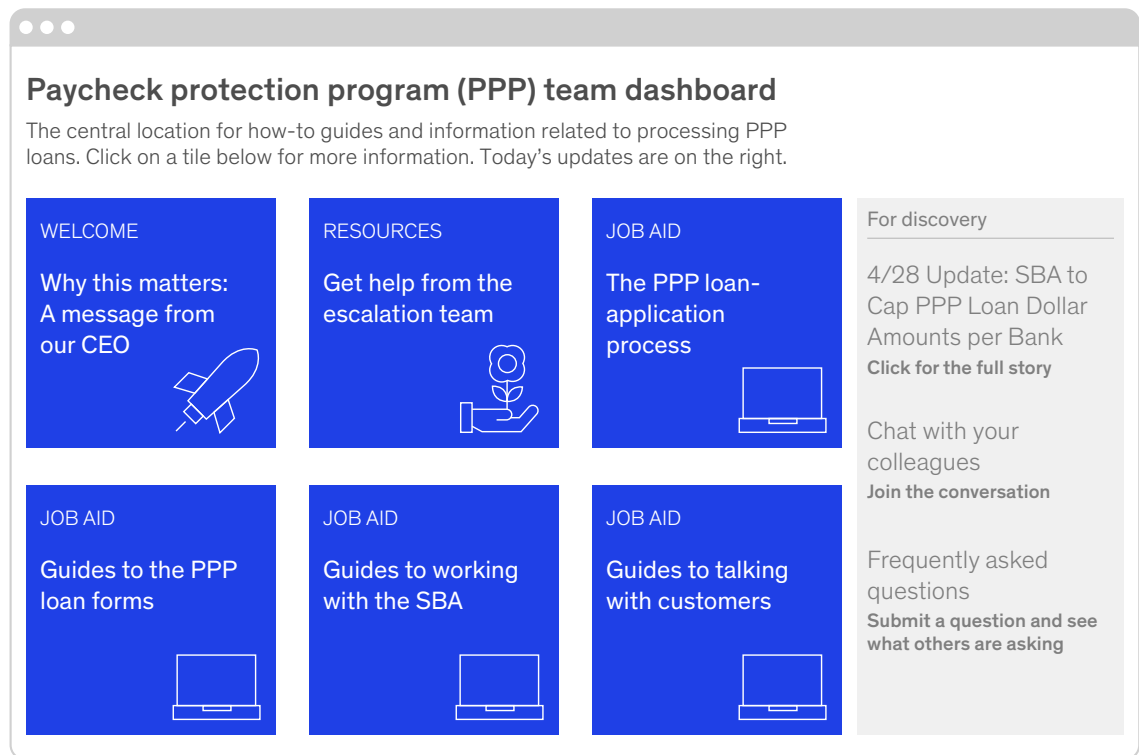
With that in mind, effective rapid-scale workplace conversion must focus intently on learners' needs. That requires the learning leaders shaping such programs to adopt the perspective of employees taking on not just a new job but one in the disorienting and intimidating context of COVID-19. Five approaches can shape and guide the learning environment:

1. **"Don't overwhelm me."** Learning new skills, technology, and procedures is stressful, and there is a limit to the amount of new information people can absorb under the best of circumstances. For this reason, rapid-skills-conversion approaches require managers to relentlessly prioritize the tasks that matter most. Apply the "80/20 rule": teach the 20 percent of skills that will enable employees to address 80 percent of the situations they will encounter. Leave out exceptions and unusual cases for now; instead, help people master the smallest possible set of critical skills.

2. **"Let me try."** Most professional learning relies heavily on a "telling" model. An instructor (or a digital course) delivers a tidy lecture accompanied by a set of slides. Cognitive science tells us that while this approach is efficient and convenient for instructors, it is rarely effective. Most people are not hardwired to remember lectures and actually learn best through old-fashioned trial and error; that's why pilots practice with in-flight simulators and soldiers play war games. To transfer new skills from training to the workplace, people need to try, make mistakes, see the consequences, reflect, and try again. Focused and hands-on learning experiences accelerate the cycle of try, fail, reflect to prime people quickly for real-life experiences.

3. **"Help when I need it most."** Businesses that are rushing to reopen have little time for formal learning experiences. Most will have to ask workers to dive in before they feel fully prepared. This can work if leaders give people the resources they need—simple tools such as guides, checklists, frequently asked questions— that they can reference based on their job function (exhibit). Mobile apps and alerts are an efficient way to reach tech-enabled audiences. Use technology when and how it makes sense, prioritizing simplicity and ease of use.

4. **"Give me a safety net."** People need to know they're not alone, especially when they are

Exhibit

Supporting employees with tools and resources both during and after training is key to rapidly adding workplace skills.

Illustrative dashboard

Paycheck protection program (PPP) team dashboard

The central location for how-to guides and information related to processing PPP loans. Click on a tile below for more information. Today's updates are on the right.

WELCOME	RESOURCES	JOB AID
Why this matters: A message from our CEO	Get help from the escalation team	The PPP loan-application process

JOB AID	JOB AID	JOB AID
Guides to the PPP loan forms	Guides to working with the SBA	Guides to talking with customers

For discovery

4/28 Update: SBA to Cap PPP Loan Dollar Amounts per Bank
Click for the full story

Chat with your colleagues
Join the conversation

Frequently asked questions
Submit a question and see what others are asking

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uncertain about a new task. Strive to give every worker a person to contact when exceptions and unusual cases arise. This approach supports more than workers' peace of mind; it also enables scale by allowing frontline employees to handle the vast majority of work and reduces the risk of error.

5. **"Remind me why I'm important."** Studies on motivation show that, among other things, a sense of purpose contributes to overall job satisfaction and productivity. This is especially true in an environment where seemingly "low level" work has far-ranging impact. While visiting a NASA space center in 1962, President John F. Kennedy met a janitor and asked him about his job. "Well, Mr. President, I'm helping to put a man on the moon," the janitor replied.[1]

In a COVID-19 world, the nature of seemingly "basic" tasks performed by people at all levels of an organization is being recalibrated. Savvy learning leaders will be sure to tell employees why they matter.

Rapid skill conversion in practice

To illustrate how capability and skill transfer can be achieved in a severely compressed time frame, it's possible to build on the experience outlined above of bank employees learning to process loans for the PPP. Three approaches—assembling a team that's primed for success; providing a focused, hands-on learning experience; and building an on-the-job support system—emerge as critical building blocks for success.

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[1] Anisha Phillips and Sarah Saska, "Can we design a more equitable 'business as usual' after COVID-19?," *Policy Options*, May 4, 2020, policyoptions.irrpp.org.

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Assemble a team that's 'primed' for success

In assembling the team of people who will take on the task, there will be an obvious population from which to draw—people who have experience in a similar job or task. In the PPP example, current loan processors are primed with experience that enables them to dive in fast, and they likely understand the general lexicon of loan processing. The skills-conversion experience can therefore focus on the specific regulations, forms, and processes associated with the PPP. If the "primed" population is too small, a bank might look to hire people with broadly similar skill sets, for example, bookkeepers, accountants, or other financial-services professionals.

Provide a focused, hands-on learning experience

To activate the five common-sense principles of learning described earlier, design a learning solution that does the following:

— **Starts with a bang.** Remind learners why their task—regardless of seniority or simplicity—is both urgent and important. In this case, loan officers are doing more than filling out forms and verifying payroll data. They are performing a critical service that enables a business's survival.

— **Teaches "just enough" and no more.** In the PPP example, it's likely that loan officers will need to explain the application process simply, and apply the terms and conditions of the loan that most commonly relate to most business owners. They would also likely need to be able to answer a set of five to ten frequently asked questions and determine a loan application's status. To design

the first round of training, consult with experts to define the minimum-viable-task list. Relentlessly cut infrequent, noncritical tasks. Then, monitor the work and fine-tune the list to better prepare the next round of learners.

— **Drives realistic practice.** As anyone who's learned to parallel park can confirm, the cycle of try, fail, and repeat is central to learning. Rapidly retraining loan officers is no different. In the PPP illustration, loan officers had a matter of days to get up to speed. To accelerate their learning, learning leaders would re-create real-life experiences. One way to do this is to upload fictional cases to the bank's database. Another is to play the role of emotional customers calling to demand answers about the status of a loan application. Don't understate complexity. Rather, prepare people for it by starting with basic transactions and then increasing the level of technical and interpersonal complexity. Provide instruction on a just-in-time basis and encourage learners to rely on job aids (see the following section) for support.

Build an on-the-job support system

The key differentiator of a solution that delivers a rapid-scale workplace-skilling conversion is how well that solution supports employees post-training, when they've started a new role. In the PPP example, bank employees would benefit from the availability of multiple support resources, delivered, for the sake of speed, via the bank's existing systems. These resources should include the following:

- **Easy-to-navigate online material** that defines acronyms, elucidates terms and conditions, answers frequently asked questions, and provides guides to internal systems and processes, as well as scripts for managing difficult customers. Start simple and make updates based on real-life experiences.

- **A digital "hub"** that serves as the central location for job aids and a message board for critical updates. A discussion board enables employees to make suggestions and flag issues they're facing. Their comments inform updates to resources.

- **A push-notification system** that sends "first alerts" to the front line—for example, when the loan regulator issues new information about the lending process. Over time, the bank can add a system of daily nudges to drive best practices and highlight common errors.

- **An "escalation" team** that provides just-in-time support, feedback, and coaching. The questions the escalation team receives can serve to inform updates to job aids and better ways to encourage behaviors.

Tailoring solutions to audience needs

This approach is suited to workers with ready access to digital and mobile support systems. The same components can also form the backbone of a repeatable solution in other, analog contexts. To tailor those components to the environment and needs of audiences in other organizations, begin by asking the following questions:

- What is the smallest number of skills that will enable workers to have the greatest and quickest impact?

- How will you give them hands-on practice in those skills and a supportive, judgment-free environment in which to learn from their mistakes?

- What style of support will be easiest for them to access on the job, for example, through digital tools or an analog solution?

- Who has the skills to serve as an escalation-team member? What preparation do they need?

- Why is this job important, and how can you make that clear to those who do it?

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Since the start of the pandemic, many organizations have redeployed teams with astonishing agility. Still, the crisis's duration and ongoing impact remain unclear. Businesses that can scale rapid workplace conversion to adapt to emerging needs will be better positioned to navigate disruptions and pave the way to stronger recovery.

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