

Boosting the accessibility of workplace reskilling

How can we ensure that everyone has the skills needed to thrive in the 21st century? Three experts sketch out a vision.

We are headed toward a brave new world of learning and work. Continuous learning, along with the development of entirely new workplace skills—at more frequent intervals, throughout a person’s career—will become commonplace. And the time to prepare is now. Since 2016, the Consortium for Advancing Adult Learning & Development (CAALD) has been attempting to clarify the challenges ahead and stretch toward potential solutions. CAALD—a group of learning authorities whose members include researchers, corporate and not-for-profit leaders, and McKinsey experts—recently held its fourth annual meeting in Norwalk, Connecticut. Amidst a set of roll-up-your-sleeves problem-solving solutions, members also took time to learn from one another.

Three CAALD members—Chike Aguh, a principal at McChrystal Group and a former member of the Council on Foreign Relations—sponsored task force on the future of the US workforce; Beth Cobert, CEO of Skillful; and Bror Saxberg, vice president of learning science at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative—discussed in depth the issue of equitable access. What should leaders do to ensure that no one gets left behind as digitization, automation, and advances in artificial intelligence change the nature of work and the skills that are most needed? Progress will demand innovation so that, in the words of Chike Aguh, we can evolve from getting individuals access “to some type of reskilling,” to ensuring that “anyone, anywhere, can get the learning they need, specifically tailored to them.” What follows are edited excerpts of their conversation, which was moderated by McKinsey’s Allen Webb.

Coaching at scale

Bror Saxberg: We’ve known for millennia that one-to-one coaching by a master is an incontrovertibly great way to build a wide range of complex cognitive skills. What we don’t know is how to do it in an affordable way. How can we make it available for everyone and efficiently disseminate it at scale? This is where technology begins to have a really important role to play.

Beth Cobert: What we've learned as we try to do this at scale—particularly in communities that may not have had access before—is that we do need a mix of technology and personal touch, as Bror suggests. We've seen the power of an individual coach to make a difference, to give people the confidence so that they can get from where they are now to a good job with a sustainable wage.

We've structured our program so that it's much more intensive and personal, but we've also created a community of coaches across the state of Colorado, and in Indiana. They're all on an online platform, built on Microsoft Teams, where they have access not only to digital tools to help them in their roles but also to each other, in order to share practices. And that's how we're trying to think about how we get to scale.

Chike Aguh: I agree that the personal is important, because when we think about this issue through an equity lens, we have to acknowledge that people of color, or people from disadvantaged backgrounds, are the least likely to get that kind of coaching. We not only have to give them what other more privileged folks are getting but also, in some ways, dial that up to compensate for other challenges and barriers that they may be facing.

If we look at what the US workforce will look like in 2040, African American and Latino employees will make up a majority—and those are some of the main groups that our system fails right now. So there's a great cost to inaction on this and a lot of opportunity at stake if companies can get this right on a broader scale.

Bror Saxberg: Part of this is that we often think about these skilling or coaching opportunities as being more in the technical domain. What we miss is the comprehensive learner-development problem, which is not just about workforce or academic skills—it's about social and emotional skills, it's about struggling with your identity, dealing with impostor syndrome. Some folks are going to walk in with a strong sense of their identity or a great growth mind-set. But others will not have had that kind of support from their families or support systems.

For people who didn't have that kind of support in their lives, that lack is going to be one of their key roadblocks. Both kinds of people are going to show up at the same training program. We need ways to understand where you are on the set of multiple dimensions, and then work with you as needed to overcome the things that may get in your way.

Engaging diverse stakeholders

Chike Aguh: Each sector does certain things better than others, and it is important to realize that not everyone can do everything. The government is good at scale and at creating incentives. One example I always use is the desegregation of schools in the American South. It was able to go from 16 percent desegregated schools to 84 percent in a matter of seven or eight years, because the federal government enforced it and put money behind making that outcome happen.

What the private sector is good at is knowing what the problem is and what skills are needed. What they may not be as good at, particularly if they're publicly traded, is the long view, because it's just not the nature of their incentives.

If you can think of who can take the most risk, because they don't have voters and they don't have shareholders, it's the not-for-profit space. Understanding what everyone is good at allows you to begin to think about a division of responsibility and labor between these stakeholders that's most effective.

Bror Saxberg: There are trillions of dollars of corporate value trapped behind walls of bad training. If someone can start to drill holes in that wall and begin to get the lake to start draining out, it's going to cause cracks in the wall. We'll wind up with a multitrillion-dollar tsunami of demand by corporations for better education. So I hope that whether it's philanthropies, government, or corporations that they all get out their picks and start banging on this wall.

I think part of this means thinking through, all the way down the chain, from what's needed in companies to what's needed to prepare people for that new world of work. We haven't really done that yet. People might still be arguing over what should be in a fourth-grade curriculum, but there's essentially no empirical link to what's going to be needed at work or in higher education. So we end up with these islands of controversy about what should be covered, as opposed to stepping back and asking, "Is this math skill that we've been arguing over for years actually something that people do in the workplace anymore?"

Why are we spending all this time on skills that are being automated away? I'm old enough that I was trained to use a slide rule as an engineer. This was at a time when scientific calculators had already come out. It was obvious slide rules were unnecessary, but it was wrapped up in the identity of an engineer. So we kept having to be trained to be good at slide rules. We have to break that pattern so that as changes happen in the workforce, they permeate back through all the training and learning programs we have throughout our lives.

Changing processes, changing institutions

Beth Cobert: Our work involves engaging employers with community colleges and other training resources in ways that can shape things at a pace that fits with what business needs, as opposed to a more traditional academic cycle of semesters.

Today, changing your curriculum really fast means you did it in two years. The employers say, "Well, that's great, but I need it now." We're starting to see that happen.

We had done some work building a skills-based job curriculum based on what would prepare you for a reasonable entry-level job in a certain industry that would be a good jumping-off point for what could be a great career but that wouldn't require a

bachelor's degree. Unbeknownst to us, a professor at one of the local community colleges in Colorado took the curriculum and said, "I teach about three-quarters of what you have in your curriculum. I describe it in somewhat different terms—I'm just going to change my class." So she rewrote her curriculum, got it reaccredited, and was done in a semester. And there it was, a class that actually met what employers want. So that's a great initiative. We'd love to scale that. We can't quite clone her, but we're working on it.

Bror Saxberg: I'll tell you a funny story about why we struggle. I went back to the electrical-engineering department at one of my alma maters and was talking with them about how they were doing. They said, "As a state university, we want to provide more electrical engineers for our state. But we have two problems. First, we are all academic electrical engineers; we don't know what our graduates do at this thing called *work*." I said, "That's a problem, because you're supposed to be training people. What's the second problem?" They said, "Well, we have no idea how to reward any one of us who chooses to solve the first problem, because none of that work is publishable in any of the journals that we use to meet tenure-track criteria. We're kind of stuck." We have to unstuck that. Q

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Beth Cobert is the CEO of Skillful. **Bror Saxberg** is the vice president of learning science at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

This article represents edited comments from a discussion moderated by McKinsey's Allen Webb at the fourth annual meeting of the Consortium for Advancing Adult Learning & Development (CAALD). For a related conversation, see "Redefining the role of the leader in the reskilling era," on McKinsey.com. Audio highlights of both articles are available on iTunes.

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