



Upskilling Playbook: Overview

UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute

May 2025

Abstract

The *Upskilling Playbook* is a strategic guide for organizations to build, scale, and integrate skills-based workforce development initiatives that drive business performance and career growth. Despite rapid economic and technological shifts making upskilling a business imperative, many efforts struggle to gain traction and become embedded in business strategy.

This playbook cuts through the noise while preserving the depth needed to drive real change – integrating corporate best practices, academic research, and practical application. It helps organizations amplify the impact of existing initiatives or launch new efforts with clarity and measurable results. It provides a practical framework for navigating challenges, capitalizing on opportunities, and implementing upskilling at scale. Covering key areas such as workforce ecosystem development, program design, measurement strategies, and leadership alignment, it delivers actionable insights for HR professionals, business leaders, and decision-makers.

When organizations fully embed upskilling into their talent and business strategy, they create sustainable talent pipelines, improve retention, and future-proof their workforce against industry shifts and technological advancements.

What's at Stake

Upskilling is the strategic process of equipping workers with new skills that enable career advancement, drive business performance, and strengthen communities. It extends beyond traditional training programs—effective upskilling aligns employee aspirations with evolving business needs, ensuring organizations remain competitive in a rapidly changing economy. When implemented with intention, upskilling closes skill gaps, improves internal mobility, and unlocks untapped workforce potential, delivering long-term value for individuals, businesses, and society.

Over the past decade, upskilling has transitioned from a workforce trend to a business necessity, driven by rapid technological advancements, shifting workforce dynamics, and increasing competition for talent. To adapt, organizations have invested heavily in education programs, skill-building initiatives, and workforce credentialing. Yet, significant challenges remain in scaling and integrating these efforts strategically across the business.

The Current Landscape: Progress and Challenges

While many industries have embraced upskilling, execution challenges persist. Research underscores both the opportunity and urgency:

 **Demand for upskilling is growing** – Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports a 700 percent increase in references to "reskilling," "upskilling," and "on-the-job training" in job postings from 2020 to 2022.

 **Skill transitions are inevitable** – McKinsey notes that workers in lower-wage roles are up to 14 times more likely to need occupational transitions than those in higher-wage positions, with 12 million transitions expected in the US by 2030.

 **Few organizations are scaling effectively** – Accenture research indicates that only 5 percent of companies are reskilling their workforce at scale.

 **Employees feel internal career mobility is limited** – i4cp found that 39 percent of organizations say it's easier for employees to find a job externally than internally.

The failure to address these challenges results in attrition, increased hiring costs, and lost competitiveness.

The Case for Action: Why Upskilling Matters

Organizations that invest in upskilling see significant returns:

 **Closing Skills Gaps** – 52 percent of CEOs cite lack of workforce skills as a major barrier to value creation.

 **Enhancing Retention & Engagement** – Employees are 2.9 times more likely to stay with organizations that invest in their growth.

 **Future-Proofing the Workforce** – McKinsey estimates that 30 percent of hours worked today could be automated by 2030, reinforcing the need for continuous skill development.

Despite the benefits, many organizations struggle to make upskilling a core business strategy, often due to siloed initiatives, unclear ROI, or lack of leadership alignment.

Who This Playbook Is For

This playbook is designed for leaders responsible for workforce transformation, including:

- ✓ **HR & Talent Leaders** – Those designing and implementing workforce development strategies.
- ✓ **Business Executives** – Leaders seeking to integrate upskilling into core business objectives.
- ✓ **Decision-Makers** – Leaders focused on demonstrating the business value of upskilling through measurable outcomes.

Whether you are building an upskilling initiative from scratch, scaling an existing program, or optimizing a mature effort, this playbook provides adaptable guidance tailored to your organization's needs.

How to Use This Playbook

This playbook serves as a flexible, user-friendly resource to support upskilling strategy development. It can be used in two ways:

- ✓ **Targeted Exploration** – Dive into specific sections such as Ecosystem, Metrics, or Implementation based on organizational priorities.
- ✓ **Comprehensive Approach** – Follow the playbook end-to-end to build an integrated, strategic upskilling framework.

Inside, You'll Find:

- ✦ **Stories & Case Studies** – Real-world insights illustrating best practices and lessons learned.
- ✦ **Tools & Prompts** – Practical frameworks and worksheets to guide application.

This is not just a guide—it's a toolkit for driving impact.

Perspectives on Upskilling

The Business Leader's Dilemma

The business leader is responsible for delivering results under immense pressure. Their goal? To ensure their organization remains competitive, innovative, and resilient in the face of disruption. Yet, they are often burdened by pressing concerns:

- ⚠️ "What if I push for change and it fails?"
- ⚠️ "Can we afford to prioritize upskilling when resources are stretched thin?"
- ⚠️ "Will this disrupt operations or alienate employees?"

These leaders face a balancing act between near-term deliverables and long-term talent strategy. Resource constraints, shifting priorities, and fear of disrupting established processes often hold them back. They understand the need for change but lack clarity on where to start or how to make the case for action.

The HR & Talent Leader's Challenge

HR and talent leaders are committed to shaping the organization's future through workforce development, but they often operate within systemic silos and encounter skepticism. Their vision is to build opportunities for employees while ensuring upskilling aligns with business strategy. However, they grapple with critical concerns:

- ⚠️ "How do I prove ROI when results may take years to materialize?"
- ⚠️ "What if business leaders won't buy into what we truly need to make this work?"
- ⚠️ "Can I even get teams aligned without conflict?"

These leaders understand that upskilling must be more than a benefit program—it must be a business driver. Yet, they face challenges securing leadership buy-in, aligning priorities across departments, and ensuring that upskilling efforts translate into real workforce and business outcomes.

At the heart of these challenges is a shared reality: Both business and HR leaders recognize the need for upskilling but struggle to bridge the gap between intention and execution. Moving forward requires shifting perspectives, breaking down silos, and positioning upskilling as an enabler of business success and workforce transformation.

Reframing Challenges as Opportunities

Organizations that succeed in upskilling don't just acknowledge challenges—they use them as catalysts for momentum. By operationalizing change, they transform friction points into design points, making upskilling a natural part of how the business evolves.

 **The Challenge of Silos** – Silos aren't just barriers; they're opportunities to bring teams together around shared goals. Breaking them down involves fostering conversation about the connections and rewards that are possible across HR, finance, and operations, and ensuring upskilling efforts are fully integrated into business strategy.

 **Concerns Over ROI** – Traditional metrics like participation rates in upskilling programs don't tell the full story. This is a chance to rethink success by measuring outcomes that truly matter such as internal mobility, retention, and business performance. The key is building a tracking plan that evolves over time, rather than relying on static benchmarks.

 **Resistance From Leaders** – Pushback isn't just resistance; it's an opportunity to create advocates. Leaders are more likely to support upskilling when they see its direct connection to agility, innovation, and marketplace competitiveness. The key is framing upskilling as a business enabler, not just an HR initiative.

High-performing organizations analyze roadblocks for insights and build solutions around them. Every obstacle holds the potential for transformation when approached with the right mindset and structure. The real shift happens when learning is embedded into workflows, decision-making, and career pathways—turning upskilling from a one-time initiative into an ongoing practice.

This isn't about overnight fixes. It's about creating the momentum that drives systemic change and long-term success.

Core Principles for Driving Change

To successfully drive change in workforce strategy, leaders must move beyond intention to execution. UpSkill America recommends the following principles to help shift efforts from ideas into action:

 **Start With Big Ideas and Bold Vision.** Change happens when leaders challenge assumptions and push boundaries—not for the sake of disruption, but to unlock new possibilities. The most effective upskilling efforts connect learning to ambitious goals that drive business growth, industry leadership, and workforce adaptability. However, a bold vision alone isn't enough; leaders must bridge the gap between workforce strategy and business priorities, ensuring that transformation is positioned as a core business driver, not just an HR initiative.

✓ **Make Ownership and Collaboration Intentional.** Real change doesn't happen just because new possibilities exist—people must be invited to participate in a way that makes them feel genuinely invested. Leaders must go beyond asking for input and instead create structures that provide real decision-making power, align incentives, and ensure collaboration leads to action.

One of the biggest challenges in workforce transformation is that leaders don't always see the urgency. This isn't always resistance—it's often misalignment with their immediate priorities. The key is strategically positioning upskilling to connect with business goals and decision-making dynamics. Involving the right people at the right time helps shift perception, build momentum, and make transformation a shared priority.

✓ **Bridge the Gap Between Tradition and Innovation.** The best organizations don't discard everything that came before; they evolve. Change sticks when leaders respect the strengths of existing systems while integrating forward-thinking strategies that challenge outdated thinking. The challenge is that leaders often default to short-term priorities like revenue growth and cost-cutting without realizing the hidden costs of workforce stagnation. Helping them see the long-term value of workforce innovation—rather than just reacting to market shifts—makes transformation a proactive, not reactive, strategy.

✓ **Focus On Outcomes, Not Just Activity.** Change efforts often stall when they prioritize effort over impact. Leaders must continuously measure and refine upskilling strategies to ensure they drive real business results, empower employees, and deliver long-term value. Traditional training metrics like participation rates don't tell the full story; instead, organizations must measure success in terms of internal mobility, retention, business agility, and more.

What It Looks Like When Upskilling Works

We've seen what happens when organizations stop tweaking and start building smarter systems:

- A restaurant chain cut leadership turnover by 40% – without hiring externally.
- A healthcare system turned retention pain into a pipeline strategy.
- A global employer connected upskilling data directly to mobility – and saved millions.
- A media company built a learning program that felt real and accessible for participants – and made it work through collaboration across leaders and stakeholders.

But where did they start? What barriers did they hit? What tools did they wish they had?

This playbook holds those stories – and the tools they used, the ones they invented, and the ones they wished they had along the way. It brings together insights, frameworks, and ready-

to-apply resources you can adapt to your own context – whether you’re just getting started or scaling what’s already in motion.

This is the toolkit they didn’t have. Now you do. You can learn from their experience, avoid their pitfalls, and make bigger impact – faster.

Looking Ahead

Building a Sustainable Workforce

When upskilling is fully integrated into workforce strategy, organizations realize benefits that extend beyond immediate business needs:

-  For Employees – Career mobility, growth, and increased job satisfaction.
-  For Organizations – Higher productivity, stronger engagement, and measurable ROI.
-  For Communities – Stronger workforce pipelines and economic opportunity.

Moreover, mission-driven upskilling efforts resonate across diverse workforces. Research from McKinsey highlights that purpose-driven work motivates employees across all generations, reinforcing the importance of inclusive, human-centered workforce development.

Upskilling is more than a workforce initiative—it is a strategic imperative for business competitiveness. Organizations that embrace it future-proof their workforce, build resilience, and drive innovation.

This playbook will guide you through:

-  Designing an integrated upskilling ecosystem.
-  Selecting the right program components.
-  Measuring success with meaningful metrics.
-  Implementing with agility and leadership alignment.

At UpSkill America, we believe in advancing collaborative solutions that create shared value for workers, businesses, and communities—ensuring long-term success by aligning talent development with economic opportunity. We work to drive a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, and policymakers committed to expanding high-quality education and career advancement opportunities. This playbook is another contribution to that effort, offering a practical guide to designing and implementing upskilling strategies that not only strengthen businesses but also empower employees and uplift communities.

Acknowledgements

This playbook and the research that enabled it were made possible through collaboration with business leaders throughout other projects and participants in our [Education and Career Mobility Fellowship](#). The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of UpSkill America alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any particular employer.

Creative Commons

UpSkill America is proud to release this publication under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) so that other organizations can use and share it to inform and support their work. Note that the use and redistribution of this publication must include an attribution, and this license does not permit use for commercial purposes or modification of the source material. If your use of this publication is not covered by this license, please email the UpSkill America team at upskillamerica@aspeninstitute.org for written permission. We encourage you to contact us to share your feedback and let us know how you've used this publication in your work.

Suggested Citation

"Upskilling Playbook: Overview." UpSkill America, The Aspen Institute. May 2025.
<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/upskilling-playbook-overview/>

About

About UpSkill America

UpSkill America, an initiative of the Aspen Institute [Economic Opportunities Program](#), supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America's frontline workers.

We seek to create a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, and policymakers working collaboratively to implement education, training, and development strategies that result in better jobs and opportunities for frontline workers, more competitive businesses, and stronger communities. Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and learn more at upskillamerica.org.



About the Economic Opportunities Program

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Learn more at aspeninstitute.org/eop.



About the Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners. For more information, visit www.aspeninstitute.org.





2300 N Street NW #700
Washington DC 20037

upskillamerica.org

upskillamerica@aspeninstitute.org