



Upskilling Playbook:
Maturity Levels

UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute

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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

Organizations are under increasing pressure to adapt to shifting workforce needs, develop talent in alignment with business priorities, and build a more agile, future-ready workforce. Yet too often, upskilling is treated as a standalone initiative rather than a core driver of workforce transformation. The **Upskilling Maturity Model** provides a structured way to evaluate an organization's current state and define the necessary steps to move toward a fully integrated, strategic approach to workforce development.

This chapter explores how upskilling maturity evolves—moving from transactional, job-specific training to a deeply embedded learning strategy that fuels workforce mobility, leadership development, and long-term business success. It examines the key shifts required at each stage, including:

- Moving from reactive, short-term training to a proactive, future-focused learning strategy.
- Ensuring learning is not just about filling immediate skill gaps but positioning employees for evolving business needs.
- Redefining leadership's role so managers are not just approving training but actively developing talent.
- Restructuring learning and development from a traditional training function to a strategic workforce partner embedded in talent planning and business decision-making.
- Ensuring workforce development efforts produce measurable impact—reducing hiring costs, increasing internal mobility, and driving organizational agility.

The model also highlights how form must follow function: As learning evolves from a support function to a business enabler, the structure of learning organizations must shift accordingly. At earlier levels of maturity, learning is typically housed within HR, delivering training as a service. At later levels, learning functions are designed to directly influence business transformation, talent strategy, and workforce planning.

In the highest-performing organizations, upskilling and workforce development are not separate initiatives—they are core business imperatives, shaping workforce strategy and ensuring long-term competitiveness. This chapter provides a roadmap for leaders who want to move beyond incremental improvements and build a workforce development approach that is truly embedded, future-ready, and aligned with both employee growth and business success.

The Five Levels of Upskilling Maturity

Ad Hoc & Reactive Learning Offerings (Level 1)

Learning is primarily transactional, focused on short-term skills needed for immediate job performance. Training is delivered as a response to specific operational needs rather than as part of a workforce strategy. There is no structured approach to career development, and upskilling is not linked to internal mobility. Leaders see training as an optional support tool rather than a core business function. The learning organization is a small team within HR, primarily handling compliance and onboarding and specific training work for near-term job needs.

Targeted & Functional Learning Offerings (Level 2)

Training programs expand within specific teams or functions, often in response to known skill gaps. Some internal certification programs emerge, but learning remains tied to current job needs rather than long-term career growth. Leadership support for development is inconsistent, and upskilling is not yet fully integrated into workforce planning. The learning function starts to evolve but remains primarily a responsive service provider, rather than a strategic business partner.

Structured & Scalable Learning Offerings (Level 3)

Learning is integrated into workforce planning, aligning with internal mobility and career development. Programs expand beyond technical skills to include leadership training and cross-functional capabilities. Employees have clearer pathways for advancement, and upskilling efforts are actively linked to promotions and talent mobility. Leaders play a more active role in coaching employees and integrating learning into performance management. The learning organization is valued, with collaborative practices and governance structures to measure impact and ensure alignment with business priorities.

Integrated & Ecosystem-Driven Learning Offerings (Level 4)

Learning is positioned as a core part of business strategy, facilitating both lateral and upward mobility. Programs are personalized and designed not just for current job success but for future workforce needs. AI-driven insights support career growth, and leadership development becomes a strategic priority. The learning organization is deeply connected to talent management, workforce planning, and business operations, contributing to workforce agility and hiring strategies.

Proactive & Future-Ready Learning Offerings (Level 5)

Learning is seamlessly embedded into business operations, shaping workforce decisions before skill gaps emerge. Employees continuously build skills for evolving roles, supported by predictive workforce analytics. Traditional job structures give way to skills-based work models, improving agility and business innovation. Leaders act as talent developers, and upskilling is central to talent attraction, retention, and employer branding. The learning function is fully integrated into business, influencing business transformation and economic mobility.

Maturity Model Overview by Category

This section is designed as a practical tool to help you assess where you currently stand in their upskilling maturity journey. It serves as a thought starter across each level of the maturity model and common categories.

To make this real, this structured view highlights:

- ✓ How employees experience upskilling at each stage
- ✓ How processes evolve to support learning and career mobility
- ✓ What workforce and business metrics emerge over time
- ✓ How organizational structure shifts to support skill-based talent models
- ✓ The role of external partnerships in sustaining and scaling workforce development

As you review this framework, consider:

- ✦ What example speaks to where your organization is today within and across dimensions?
- ✦ What examples speak to where do you want to be?
- ✦ What specific actions or changes would help your organization advance to the next level?

This worksheet-style tool is meant to spark insight, create alignment, and help guide strategic decision-making.

1. Ad Hoc & Reactive

Employee Experience

Employees rely on self-driven learning with no clear career mobility. Lack of connection between skills development and promotions, leading to low engagement and higher turnover. Learning is perceived as solely compliance-related requirement rather than an opportunity for growth. (See: [Types of Upskilling](#) chapter)

Processes

No formal upskilling processes; leaders decide ad hoc who gets training, often based on short-term needs. Training viewed as a cost center, not a value driver. Leaders are not accountable for employee development. (See: [Program Components](#) & [Ecosystem](#) chapters)

Metrics

Basic participation tracking, but no measurement of impact or skills gained. Low engagement correlates with high turnover and low internal mobility. Recruiting costs increase as external hiring remains the primary solution. (See: [Metrics](#) chapter)

Organizational Structure

HR manages training, but it is not integrated into business strategy. Workforce planning is reactionary and siloed, leading to higher external hiring costs. (See: [Implementation](#) chapter)

Ecosystem

Lack of industry collaboration; external hiring is the default for skill gaps. Reliance on external recruitment increases talent acquisition costs. No employer brand impact (See: [Ecosystem](#) chapter)

2. Targeted & Functional

Employee Experience

Some employees receive structured learning, but programs are role-specific and not tied to internal career mobility. Limited impact on retention as career pathways remain unclear limiting motivation to engage in learning.

Processes

Learning is formalized within specific functions (e.g. customer service, IT) but lacks company-wide strategy. Leaders obtain targeted learning. Employees must be nominated, leading to unequal access. (See: [Program Components](#) chapter)

Metrics

Internal certification programs emerge. Learning is tracked, but effectiveness is not measured beyond completion rates. Early-stage internal mobility metrics begin to emerge, but hiring costs remain high. (See: [Metrics](#) chapter)

Organizational Structure

Some business units invest in skills training, but there is no cross-functional collaboration. HR supports but does not lead strategy. Internal career movement is minimal. (See: [Implementation](#) chapter)

Ecosystem

Early-stage partnerships with universities or vendors, but no structured talent pipeline. Some reductions in external hiring costs, but company is not yet viewed as a workforce development leader. (See: [Ecosystem](#) chapter)

3. Structured & Scalable

Employee Experience

Employees have defined career pathways with upskilling linked to promotions. Internal mobility increases, reducing turnover. Career stories begin to emerge, demonstrating movement within the organization driven by learning.

Processes

Learning programs are centralized under HR/learning teams, with company-wide learning platforms available. Leaders are expected to develop employees, increasing leadership effectiveness. (See: [Program Components](#) chapter)

Metrics

Skills assessments are introduced. Future role needs are identified. Retention, productivity, and internal hiring rates are tracked and inform business decisions. (See: [Metrics](#) chapter)

Organizational Structure

Learning shifts from an HR service provider to an enterprise-wide workforce development partner. Workforce planning starts incorporating skills-first approaches. More roles are filled internally, lowering hiring costs.

Ecosystem

Active industry and education partnerships, with intern-to-hire programs emerging. Pipeline hiring increases, reducing reliance on external recruiters. Employer brand begins to benefit from workforce investment. (See: [Ecosystem](#) chapter)

4. Integrated & Ecosystem-Driven

Employee Experience

Employees can self-select development opportunities with personalized career maps. Internal hiring takes priority over external recruitment, cutting external hiring costs.

Processes

Learning is fully embedded in daily work; employees are expected to develop skills on the job through coaching, rotational assignments, and learning pathways. Productivity gains increase from value of employee contribution.

Metrics

Skills and skill attainment hiring and promotions. Leadership sets annual upskilling KPIs tied to business performance (e.g. reducing external hiring costs, increasing promotion rates). (See: [Metrics](#) chapter)

Organizational Structure

Business strategy and workforce planning are fully integrated; teams hire for skills, not roles. Skills-based org design emerges, reducing workforce stagnation and improving agility. (See: [Implementation](#) chapter)

Ecosystem

The company co-creates workforce programs with universities, industry groups, and government entities. More predictable talent pipeline leads to reduced hiring volatility. Workforce impact extends beyond the company, influencing regional talent mobility.

5. Proactive & Future-Ready

Employee Experience

Employees continuously reskill for future roles. AI and workforce analytics proactively suggest career shifts before skill gaps emerge. Workforce agility increases, reducing business disruption risks.

Processes

AI-driven workforce planning predicts skills needed 3-5 years out, guiding hiring and internal development strategy. Learning is integrated into compensation and performance, reinforcing a culture of development. (See: [Program Components](#) chapter)

Metrics

Predictive analytics drive real-time skills tracking. Workforce agility is measured alongside financial performance. Cost savings from reduced turnover and external hiring significantly impact bottom-line results. Learning effectiveness is tied to business transformation (See: [Metrics](#) chapter)

Organizational Structure

Organization no longer operates on traditional job hierarchies; work is structured around dynamic skills and project-based teams, improving speed and innovation. Leadership owns workforce planning as a business strategy. (See: [Implementation](#) chapter)

Ecosystem

The company shapes industry policies on workforce development and actively influences regulations, economic mobility, and national/global talent strategies. Community impact is measured and shared. Employer brand strengthens, making it easier to attract top talent. (See: [Ecosystem](#) chapter)

Case Study: Transitioning to Skills-First Hiring

A leading employer in the financial services sector eliminated degree requirements—replacing them with a skills-based hiring model that focused on verified competencies rather than formal education credentials—for 70 percent of its roles.. This shift was part of a broader industry trend toward skills-first hiring, where candidates are evaluated based on demonstrated abilities, micro-credentials, and AI-verified skills assessments.

The company implemented a digital credentialing system, where employees could earn and display verified skills through industry-recognized training programs. The system connected to both hiring and internal mobility pathways, ensuring that employees who completed upskilling programs were given priority for promotions. Managers were trained to evaluate candidates based on skill profiles rather than resumes, making hiring decisions more data-driven and equitable.

This transition resulted in a faster hiring process, increased workforce diversity, and higher internal mobility rates. Employees who previously lacked traditional qualifications gained access to higher-paying roles, while the company benefited from a more agile and future-ready workforce. By embedding skills-first hiring across the organization, the company expanded its talent pipeline while improving workforce retention.

Personas in the Maturity Model

Advancing maturity isn't just about new processes or programs—it's about adopting a different mindset that prioritizes workforce development as a strategic enabler of business success, employee growth, and community impact.

Employee: The Frustrated Learner vs. The Empowered Contributor

"I want to grow, but I don't see how. My manager encourages me to develop skills, but when I ask about career movement, there's no clear pathway. I've taken some training, but it doesn't seem to lead anywhere. If I want to advance, I may have to leave." - The Frustrated Learner

- Experience inconsistent upskilling opportunities, unlinked to internal career mobility.
- Feel investment in learning is on their own and see no direct rewards.
- Look to leave for growth elsewhere.

At higher maturity, the mindset shifts from upskilling as an optional perk to a strategic enabler of career mobility.

"I don't just take training—I know exactly how my learning connects to my career path. I've gained skills that opened new doors, and my manager actively supports my growth. I've already moved into a more senior role without leaving the company." - The Empowered Contributor

- ✓ Upward economic mobility due to clear career pathways and promotions.
- ✓ Expanded skill set that increases employability inside and outside the organization.
- ✓ Greater performance impact as employees bring new skills to their teams.
- ✓ Increased workforce stability through retention and growth.

Business Leader: The Overwhelmed Team Lead vs. The Workforce Builder

"I want to help my team grow, but I don't have the time or resources. Employees ask about development, but all I can offer is ad hoc training. We don't have the time and when they gain skills, they leave because I can't promote them. I spend more time backfilling positions than building my team." - The Overwhelmed Team Lead

- Leadership development is limited to select individuals.
- Skills are gained, but without opportunities to apply them.
- Stuck in a reactive cycle of filling vacancies.

At higher maturity, the mindset shifts from controlling talent to enabling continuous growth.

"I have the tools to support my team's development. I connect their aspirations to learning that leads somewhere. When my employees grow, my team gets stronger, and I'm recognized for building talent." - The Workforce Builder

- ✓ Increased team stability as internal movement and promotions reduce turnover.
- ✓ Stronger leadership pipeline as managers develop talent rather than replace it.
- ✓ Improved engagement and productivity as employees see real career prospects.
- ✓ Higher-performing teams with diverse skill sets that enhance collaboration.

Executive: The Costly Talent Drain vs. The Workforce Visionary

"We're always hiring, but we're still short on critical skills. Despite investing in training, we're not seeing the results we need. Our turnover is high, and our hiring costs are growing. We react to workforce challenges instead of anticipating them." - The Costly Talent Drain

- Workforce planning is reactive, not predictive.
- Talent gaps persist despite investments in external hiring.
- Training viewed as an expense rather than a strategic advantage.
- Brand reputation suffers as top talent leaves for competitors that offer growth.

At higher maturity, the mindset shifts from chasing talent to building it, from reacting to leading.

"We've moved beyond hiring to building. We anticipate skills before gaps emerge, reducing hiring costs and creating a reputation as a place where people grow and thrive. We don't just meet workforce demands—we shape them." - The Workforce Visionary

- ✓ Stronger and consistent business performance through productivity.
- ✓ Increased workforce agility with employees reskilling before roles evolve.
- ✓ Stronger brand reputation as an employer that develops and advances talent.
- ✓ Community impact and goodwill as upskilling supports local economic growth and workforce equity.
- ✓ Greater industry influence as the company shapes workforce policies and talent pipelines.

Looking Ahead: Moving to the Next Level

Each level of maturity presents distinct challenges and opportunities. Progressing to the next stage requires intentional action, leadership commitment, and the ability to navigate complexity within large organizations. HR and talent leaders play a critical role in driving this change. Below are key actions for moving to the next level:

Moving From Ad Hoc & Reactive to Targeted & Functional

- Build a case for upskilling based on workforce needs, employee retention goals, and business growth objectives.
- Establish partnerships between HR, leadership, and frontline managers to ensure alignment and secure buy-in.
- Identify key skill gaps and implement targeted upskilling initiatives addressing immediate workforce challenges.
- Create pilot programs that connect upskilling efforts to career mobility, allowing employees to experience tangible benefits.

Moving From Targeted & Functional to Structured & Scalable

- Develop a company-wide upskilling strategy with clearly-defined governance and accountability measures.
- Implement talent marketplaces that facilitate internal mobility and encourage employees to transition into new roles.
- Introduce standardized metrics to measure upskilling effectiveness, linking learning programs to performance, retention, and engagement outcomes.
- Equip managers with the tools and knowledge to support employee development, ensuring alignment between learning and business needs.

Moving From Structured & Scalable to Integrated & Ecosystem-Driven

- Embed learning into everyday work by leveraging AI-driven learning platforms and personalized development pathways.
- Align performance management and reward structures to reinforce skills-based career progression.
- Strengthen collaboration between HR, finance, and business leaders to embed upskilling into long-term workforce planning.
- Track community impact by measuring how employee upskilling improves local economic mobility and contributes to broader workforce development
- Assess the employer brand impact of upskilling initiatives, measuring improvements in talent attraction, employee engagement, and external partnerships.

Moving From Integrated & Ecosystem-Driven to Proactive & Future-Ready

- Utilize predictive workforce analytics to anticipate future skills gaps and proactively design training programs ahead of industry changes.
- Establish continuous learning ecosystems where employees are encouraged to take ownership of their career development through real-time access to training and mentorship.
- Strengthen partnerships with academic institutions, industry groups, and policymakers to influence workforce policy and shape future job markets.
- Create a skills intelligence function within HR that continually assesses industry trends and aligns workforce development initiatives with business strategy.
- Ensure that upskilling investments align with long-term business resilience, fostering agility and adaptability in an evolving labor market (McKinsey Workforce Mobility Study, 2024).

Final Thoughts: Turning Strategy into Action

Sustained workforce development requires more than just offering specific programs—it demands a shift in mindset and intentional action. Organizations that see upskilling as an ongoing investment, rather than a response to immediate needs, will be better equipped to navigate industry changes and workforce disruptions.

The most successful organizations don't wait for skill gaps to emerge—they anticipate them. By embedding upskilling into workforce planning, linking development to business outcomes, and leveraging data for continuous improvement, companies can future-proof their talent strategy.

Ultimately, upskilling is not just about learning—it's about transformation for both the employee and the business. Those who invest in building a dynamic, adaptable workforce will not only see gains in retention, productivity, and engagement, but will also create a culture where people thrive, businesses grow, and industries evolve.

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