

Countries Must Build an Ecosystem to Boost Talent Development at Speed and Scale

In a lively conversation, panelists from six countries talked about future skills strategies and the role of technology in facilitating the talent transition

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the talent transition towards the future of work. Online education, hybrid and remote work, and the widespread use of digital technologies and cloud systems to support businesses during lockdowns highlighted existing trends in the job market. Particularly, it showed an increased demand for digital skills to place people in better-paying jobs and drive prosperous economies.

Across the globe, the pace of reskilling and upskilling initiatives has been slow. Countries continue to waste human capacity, keeping people in low and middle income jobs that will soon no longer exist due to automation and not participating in the digital economy. During the Frame the Future of Talent, on July 14, leaders from Australia, Brazil, Portugal, Singapore, and the United States shared reflections on the future of work, the future of workplaces, the future of learning and education, and the shifting paradigms involved with human capital development.

Three central forces push the talent transition: technological advancements, demographic changes, and globalization. The discussions revealed the need for an organizational and cultural transformation of the talent landscape to account for the dynamics affecting today's workforce. Countries and organizations need a

systemic approach that addresses skills gaps and mismatches, and takes advantage of technology and digital tools to boost the potential of talent across the globe.

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President, GFCC; and President & CEO, Council on Competitiveness, hosted the session with Dr. Roberto Alvarez, Executive Director, GFCC. She remembered how talent and competitiveness are intertwined in today's economies and a crucial driver for innovation. "Talent is the source of creativity, insight, knowledge, and skills that power innovation," she noted. "Today, more than ever before, there are opportunities to apply these levers in a systemic way to create innovations and solve global challenges."

The Frame the Future of Talent session gathered insights from Ms. Isabelle Christina, Ashoka Young Changemaker, Founder of the Black Girls Project, and Program Ambassador for UNICEF; Mr. Michael Fung, Deputy Chief Executive of SkillsFuture; Dr. Isabel Gil, Rector of the Catholic University of Portugal; Mr. Charles O. Holliday, Jr., Chairman of the GFCC; and Prof. Aleksandar Subic, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (STEM College) & Vice President Digital Innovation at RMIT University.

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President, GFCC
President & CEO, Council on Competitiveness

The GFCC released a new report during the session, *Future Skills: Lessons and Insights from a Review of Innovative Skills Development Initiatives* (see Box 1), which surveyed 32 innovative training programs and schools in more than 15 countries. The report outlines the main trends shaping the skills landscape and makes a strong case for the coupled development of soft and hard skills.

Paradigm Shift

COVID-19 created an opportunity to change work permanently in a constructive manner that unlocks people's talents and potential. Flexibility will be at the core of this paradigm shift. Businesses and organizations that review and improve today's practices to use everyone's talents more productively will experience more competitive success.

Measures that reassess work journeys and align individual's dreams and ambitions with their job goals could improve performance. "How could companies design work to meet the unique needs of their employees?" asked Mr. Holliday, instigating a conversation on the role of corporations in talent development.

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Mr. Charles O. Holliday, Jr.
Chairman, GFCC

Former Chairman, Royal Dutch Shell plc.

The education sector that trains talent for the future needs to adapt to this new framework. "We have to move towards a paradigm that is non-linear and based on lifelong learning in its nature," observed Mr. Fung. He leads SkillsFuture in Singapore, an organization under the Ministry of Education that sets policies and provides workforce training across the country. "One that is more flexible, agile, and responsive to emerging needs," he said.

The transformation needs to happen across the education sector, starting in K-12 and reaching higher education. The new training lab is in the real world with its day-to-day problems and global challenges. Methods such as project-based

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Deputy Chief Executive
SkillsFuture

learning and problem-solving that engage students with industry and communities will facilitate the talent transition.

As pointed out by Dr. Gil, "The old traditional models no longer work in a world that requires flexibility, a wide range of knowledge, and the capacity to understand different conceptual debates and different cultures." For her, COVID-19 forced universities to rethink their position, but a change was long overdue.

The Catholic University of Portugal is restructuring its pedagogical curriculum to meet the needs of a new generation who no longer rely on university degrees for starting their professional life. "Students are rethinking their enrollment and opting to assemble micro-credentials instead of undergoing a traditional degree," Dr. Gil pointed out.

The Portuguese university changed its recruitment process and reduced the weight of academic-based merit in placement evaluations. Now, it also assesses applications based on candidates' soft skills and community engagement.

Box 1. Future Skills

Globalization, increased connectivity, and rapid advancements in multiple technologies are transforming economies, businesses, and societies at large. These changes have pushed the emergence of new types of work and services, with significant impacts on the workforce. Today, individuals, companies, communities, and educators need to adapt to a changing labor market much faster than in the past. It is urgent to understand emerging skill needs and adjust education and training programs to match economic and social conditions that will pave the way for the future of work.

The Global Federation of Competitiveness Councils (GFCC) launched a new report in July this year, *Future Skills: Lessons and Insights from a Review of Innovative Skills Development Initiatives*, shedding light on the megatrends affecting the global skills landscape and benchmarking 32 innovative schools and programs operating in more than 15 countries. The report unveils how structural transformations in an increasingly complex reality will unlock new demands for digital skills and STEM, blended with "soft skills," such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, resilience, adaptability, and teamwork. The report is available for download here: <https://www.thegfcc.org/future-skills-report>.

Participants

Ms. Isabelle Christina

Ashoka Young Changemaker,
Founder of the Black Girls Project,
and Program Ambassador for
UNICEF

Mr. Michael Fung

Deputy Chief Executive, SkillsFuture

Dr. Isabel Gil

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Mr. Charles O. Holliday, Jr.

Chairman, Global Federation of
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Prof. Aleksandar Subic

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (STEM
College) & Vice President Digital
Innovation, RMIT University

Hosts

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith

President, GFCC

President & CEO, Council on
Competitiveness

Roberto Alvarez

Executive Director, Global Federation
of Competitiveness Councils (GFCC)



WATCH THE CONVERSATION

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Dr. Isabel Gil
Rector
Catholic University of Portugal

Dr. Gil, Mr. Fung, and Ms. Wince-Smith share a similar vision that countries should tie skills strategies to national economic plans to grow talent, avoid brain drain, and increase competitiveness. "If a nation or a community does not develop, retain, grow, and attract talent, it's not going to be competitive in the future," argued Ms. Wince-Smith.

Technology Will Enable the Future of Work

Technology is a force propelling the talent transition in two directions. On the one hand, rapid technological advancements are accelerating job displacement and leaving millions of people without a safety net. Future strategies must address the fast pace of technological change to safeguard people's interests and drive future prosperity. On the other hand, technology can replace hazardous work and enhance productivity. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data analytics can ramp up skills development and accurately tailor programs to fulfill personal and corporate needs.

The use of comprehensive databases bridging disciplines and identifying skills gaps (inside and outside the curriculum)

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can support students and institutions in this transition. For Prof. Subic, the strategy launched by Western Governors University in the United States, an online-based education provider, is an example of best practices. The institution released a database to help students get the most from their degrees by mapping competencies to career pathways and skills gaps in the market. Data analytics — gathering insights from multiple industries — could help universities map skills gaps and design personalized education at scale to fit students' needs and industry demands.

Still, technology can be a powerful force to drive social change and create a positive impact. Ms. Christina is a young leader who grew up in an impoverished region in the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil. As early as 13 years old, she started a social project to empower black girls living around her.

Ms. Christina is an engineering student who believes that technology can be a tool to reduce inequality and enable active learning. "I am not sure what the future will bring. But I hope that I will be leading change and positively impacting people's lives using technology," she said. "Technology will help me to enable positive change and engage with people from different backgrounds."

Build an Ecosystem

Revamping skills systems is a complex task that will require the involvement of multiple stakeholders. A recent study published by RMIT Australia, Amazon, and Alphabet revealed that Australia alone will need an additional 6.5 million digital workers by 2025. "That kind of skills gap cannot be met by business as usual. It cannot be breached by any single university or training institution alone," argued Prof. Subic.

For him, universities need to undergo digital transformation to scale up reskilling and upskilling initiatives engaging with multiple stakeholders. "Universities need to implement a digital system that allows them to work effectively at scale across a multistakeholder ecosystem," he pointed out.

In Singapore, SkillsFuture is leading a national roadmap strategy combining top-down and bottom-up initiatives, engaging with government, universities, schools, companies, and communities in general. The goal is to create an ecosystem that supports skills development across the nation and through life-long learning. But tackling this challenge requires involvement from all stakeholders, driving a mindset shift at the individual level, and encouraging transformation and responsibility.

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"You can try to build an ecosystem, but if individuals and employees do not see the need and are not motivated to invest in skills development, it doesn't work," indicated Mr. Fung. "We need to start shifting the culture to thinking about ourselves as learners for life, and for employers to support talent development."

The success of an ecosystem for national skills strategies will depend on trust, humility, persistence, leadership, tenacity, and inclusiveness. Affordability is a crucial component. All players must think about making learning accessible to all segments of the population, including low-wage and disadvantaged communities.