

HOW TO BUILD AN UPSKILLING CULTURE



TRANSFORM YOUR ORGANIZATION WITH AN UPSKILLING COMPANY CULTURE

Did you know that company culture has a big impact on your business's value?

In fact, 80% of the World's Most Admired Companies (WMAC) rank it as one of the top five factors influencing market value, **Korn Ferry data** reveals.

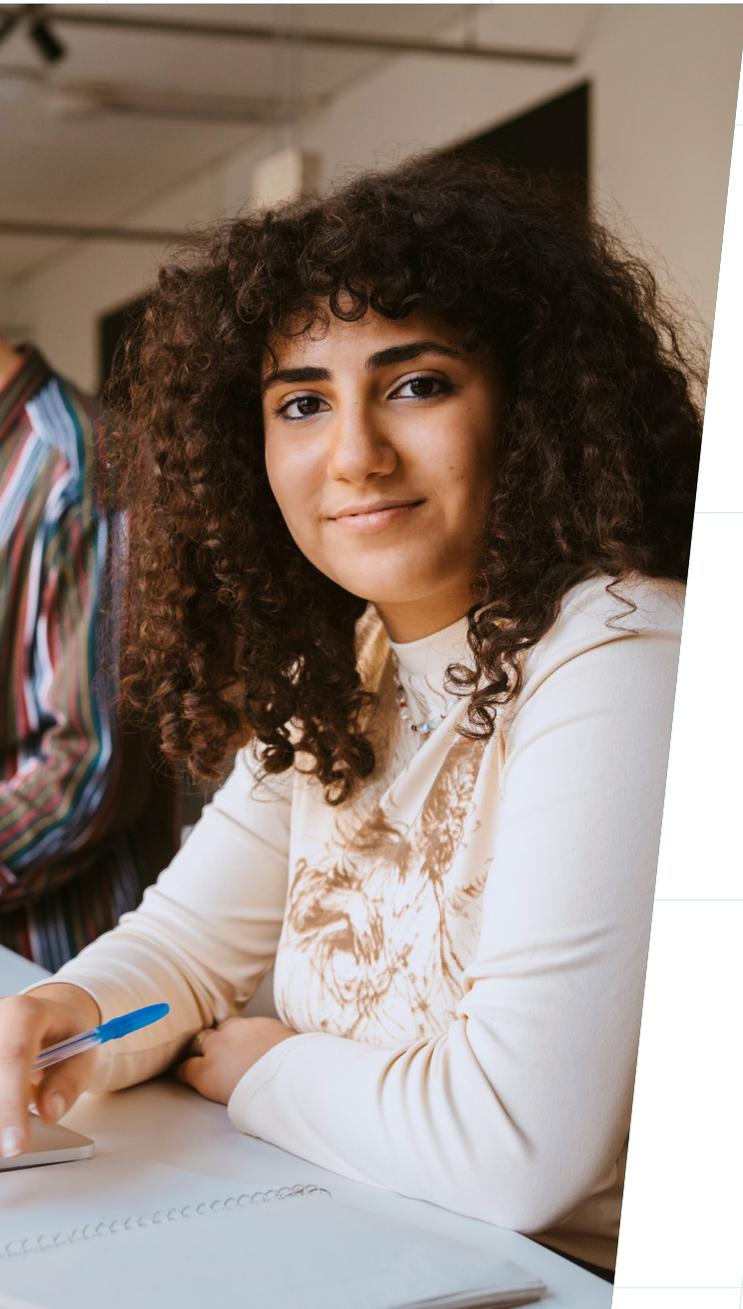
And as organizations face a skills gap that could impact growth, the WMACs say **learning will shift to become their number one cultural priority for the future**—up from fifth place currently.

A learning culture has many benefits. It ensures you have a workforce with **the skills** your organization needs now and in the future. And it also helps with internal mobility, which is crucial for employee engagement and retention.

How do you foster an upskilling culture within your organization—one that motivates your workforce, suits your current business, and addresses the future skills gap?

Read on to find out.





1. WHAT IS AN UPSKILLING CULTURE?

When you upskill an employee, you build onto their existing skill set with training and tools to use related skills.

The goal is typically to help them do their job better or to move into related or more senior roles in their area of expertise. It differs from reskilling, which is about retraining someone to take on quite different types of work.

An upskilling company culture means you've created an environment and strategy that regularly invests in the training, growth, and development of your employees. To achieve this, you need to build in sufficient time and resources for learning activities—even amid the pressures of daily work demands.

Upskilling might include:

- Hands-on learning and coaching across daily work and project assignments
- Pre-recorded webinars or talks employees can self-register for and self-schedule
- In-person workshops tailored to the needs of different teams
- Mentoring and rotational assignments
- External courses to build strength in specific areas and develop new skills
- Online courses and podcasts

To achieve success, leaders can also underpin upskilling initiatives with a structured program of learning and development. At Korn Ferry, we call this **connected coaching**.

This helps align the direction and purpose of coaching across individuals, teams, and the wider organization, which supports learning at scale.

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Regular upskilling programs encourage the spirit of continuous learning, rather than just relying on one-off events. So learning becomes more organic and embedded within the culture of the organization,

says **Ben Hubbard**, Senior Client Partner at Korn Ferry Listen

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SIX STEPS TO CREATE AN UPSKILLING COMPANY CULTURE

An upskilling culture can't happen overnight—culture change takes time. But we've outlined steps you might use to start the process:



PLAN:

Map out the significant changes in your industry and how they are set to impact your business and clients. Identify the skills your clients need now or in the near future, then match that to your employees' learning plans.



DESIGN:

Build a fully formed learning offering around each major need. For example, consider how to upskill your people to use AI tools that can help them in their work, but remember to include governance and compliance so they know how to use it effectively, ethically, and legally.



ACTIVATE:

Create a “jolt” or kick-off event. This is a hard activation or launch to shift the pattern of the status quo—opening minds up to a new behavior of continuous learning.



COMMUNICATE:

Discuss with everyone in the business what continuous learning means. This should include how it's offered, how it benefits people, and how it's rewarded.



EMPOWER:

Create the practical conditions needed for continuous learning. A key way to do this is by encouraging and supporting employees to take time away from their daily work to develop these skills.



CELEBRATE:

Establish ongoing role modeling of successful learners across the business. This can be done through public praise and clear rewards.



Spotlighting successful learners across the business is particularly important for the success and longevity of an upskilling culture.

Richenda Broadbent, Associate Client Partner, Organizational Strategy, Korn Ferry



There are people who actively seek knowledge and growth, and those that are more passive. If the 'seekers' are visibly celebrated and rewarded, then that level of appetite will become more accepted behavior for others.



3. HOW ONE COMPANY UPSKILLED FOR GLOBAL GROWTH

A global pharmaceutical company had plans for one of the most ambitious culture transformations in its 100-year history.

To realize its 2030 vision—of transcending geographic and cultural boundaries to deliver groundbreaking and innovative pharmaceutical solutions to patients—it needed to change behavior and understanding to create one common, global culture.



THE CHALLENGE



We needed to shift from behaving as a national company that does business around the world to becoming a truly global company.



To do this, the organization had to first resolve some cross-regional cultural tensions that were standing in the way of efficiency and business growth.

It needed to create a shared set of values and behaviors that would work not only in its home country, but also around the world. This required a global employee base that was open to collaboration, inclusivity, trust, and learning from others.

And it partnered with Korn Ferry for an 18-month journey to achieve this.

OUR APPROACH

We started by helping them identify what they wanted their global culture to be—and then we activated a “One Company” culture mindset across the organization to help make it happen.

Our culture activation program included:

- Creating and conducting a series of global experiential workshops with the Executive Management Committee and top 200 leaders. This enabled them to understand cultural differences by region—and the importance of aligning purpose and direction across the organization.
- Designing a program that invited cross-functional and cross-regional leaders to pair up in innovation teams, with the goal of addressing well-known cultural issues.
- Identifying, training, and activating a global community of culture change ambassadors. These employees embodied the new mindsets and behaviors and took responsibility for evangelizing them at a local level.
- Designing awards to recognize employees from across the enterprise that personified the new culture and were exemplary “global cultural citizens.”

THE IMPACT

Our combined efforts resulted in “significant improvement” on all three of the core behaviors critical to this global organization, according to a company-wide survey of all employees.



4. CULTURE BY EXAMPLE— THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Shaping culture is a key part of the role of leadership. Our survey of the World's Most Admired Companies revealed that 84% of them believe **role modeling by senior leadership** is the most important factor for determining organizational culture.

But it doesn't just rest with a CEO, a CHRO, or any particular individual. Culture requires collective responsibility, which means that every leader needs to embrace the role of **Chief Culture Officer**.

And in the same way that successful learners should regularly be praised publicly, leaders need to be visibly and loudly participating in it, too. Leaders should be talking about how they're upskilling themselves and what they're getting out of it.

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Psychological safety is a big part of an upskilling culture,

says **Guangrong Dai**, Korn Ferry's Senior Director of Research, Leadership, and Talent Management

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When you say you want to learn something, you're actually showing your vulnerability to others, that you might not be good enough in that area. For that reason, learning carries a risk in that people can be made to feel incompetent.

It is the role of leaders to lean into their needs, by seeking out coaching, mentoring, and feedback themselves. This helps establish a psychologically safe environment that supports the entire workforce to learn,

Guangrong Dai, Korn Ferry Senior Director of Research, Leadership, and Talent Management.

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5. MEASURING THE IMPACT OF UPSKILLING AND RESKILLING PROGRAMS

Being able to demonstrate to senior leadership the impact and value of upskilling and reskilling initiatives is crucial to success. This means showing a clear connection between learning interventions and business outcomes.

To do this, CHROs can follow these five steps:

1. DEFINE CLEAR METRICS

Collaborate with business stakeholders to establish specific, measurable, relevant metrics aligning with organizational goals. These may include employee performance, productivity, retention rates, customer satisfaction, and ROI.

2. SET BASELINE MEASUREMENTS

Before implementing training programs, assess the current state of the chosen metrics. This baseline data will serve as a reference point to track progress and demonstrate the impact of the initiatives.

3. MONITOR PROGRESS REGULARLY

Track and analyze the defined metrics consistently throughout the implementation of the skills development programs. This ongoing monitoring will help identify trends, successes, and areas for improvement.

4. GATHER EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK

Tailor assessment and development to your organization's unique objectives and culture.

5. COMMUNICATE RESULTS AND ADAPT

Share the progress and impact of the skills development initiatives with stakeholders, highlighting the link between learning interventions and business outcomes. Use the insights gained from data analysis and employee feedback to make data-driven decisions to continuously refine the upskilling and reskilling programs.



6. LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF AN UPSKILLING CULTURE

The long-term success of any skills development program hinges on building a company culture that consistently values and invests in it.

This means supporting learning with continuous coaching and

feedback loops, then using rewards to recognize and incentivize behavior. This will create a dynamic environment where employees are driven by their own initiative and desire to grow—and are proactive about regularly upskilling themselves.

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The organizational interest should be in creating a learning environment where people are on a continuous personal growth journey, because they're driving themselves.

If people are continually looking to add value to themselves, they're going to add value to the enterprise. From an organizational point of view, you become like a self-charging battery.

says **Richenda Broadbent, Associate ClientPartner, Organizational Strategy, Korn Ferry**

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7. USING THE MASS MODEL **TO DEVELOP AN UPSKILLING CULTURE**

Korn Ferry uses the **MASS Model** (mindset, ability, structure, systems), which develops culture change in a systemic way to accelerate behavior change at scale.

If you can shift the behavior of 10% of key influencers in an organization, you can ignite a change movement, **our data** shows.

Read our guide and learn how to apply these principles to build an upskilling culture within your own organization

GET THE GUIDE



Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

Business advisors.

Career makers.