PEOPLE, NOT TECHNOLOGY, DRIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Assess staff skills and capabilities before facilitating the change process.

BY ANGELA VALE-FEIGL

n a pre-pandemic world, the sense of urgency for an organization to engage in any digital transformation initiative or endeavor was moderate at best because all was going relatively well businesswise and because change and transformation are as difficult as they are scary. It didn't help that study after study have highlighted that up to nine out of 10 digital transformation initiatives fail or lag behind expectations. Given all that, it became almost too easy for companies to decide to not engage in a transformation and instead wait for whatever right or at least better moment in the future.

But if recent events have shown us something, it is that life does not wait for anyone to be ready. It is no longer a question of whether an organization is ready for digital transformation; the reality has evolved into a situation of adapt and adjust or perish.

Adaptability requires agility, and the only way for companies to accomplish true agility is to start with their people. That means every individual needs to be equipped with the right skills and competencies to know what to do and how to do it when it matters most.

As a team of consultants and trainers that specialize in digital transformation initiatives, DigitAll360 has seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in all stages of the process. What we have encountered and realized through the experience is that in most organizations, the focus is wrong: It is all on the digital (and technol-

ogy) aspect when it should be centered around the strategy and customer side and focused on goals and performance—which means a focus on people.

Digital transformation never was nor will ever be just about technology or about taking a process or task and converting it to digital. If a company does not critically assess the process (or issue), then digitalizing it will not remove the issue, solve the problem, or improve the process. Digital transformation is not a magic wand. Without revisiting, critically assessing, and even redesigning current tasks and processes and taking a cross-functional approach to the implementation, the initiative will not work.

For any change or transformation process to be successful, it must start at the foundation, not at the top. In other words, rather than beginning with the strategy, companies should begin

with skills and competencies that enable tasks and goals. The DigitAll360 team has developed a three-part approach for a successful and effective digital transformation initiative:

1. Put people at the center of the process.
2. Break it down to sizable bits.
3. Leave technology for last.

What follows are the three major steps talent development functions can take to enable, accompany, and facilitate digital transformation processes in their organizations.

Follow the momentum and get involved

The pandemic has forced the hand of even the most resistant companies to use digital tools for collaboration, communication, client interaction, and even performance management and measurement. Businesses implemented new ways of remote work regardless of whether they or their employees were ready.

While all employers need to be cautious to properly manage the now more blurred lines between employees' private and work lives and try to find a new balance, that has the positive effect of bringing the people aspect back in the spotlight (where it belongs). An emphasis on the people enables the TD function to move out of what was often a quite reactive or on-demand, almost defensive, position in the organization (fighting for budgets, recognition, or both) to a proactive approach where its value and importance may not be questioned as much.

More (if not all) eyes, minds, and ears are on people aspects and interactions in organizations. Leverage that momentum and bring TD-related activities back in focus. The most effective way to do that is to initiate help and guidance for contributors where they need it most: using new digital tools, collaborating, and creating synergies as well as optimizing processes and tasks. You can do that by introducing new communication or interaction tools or accompanying employees in the often-tedious adoption of the tools that are already in use within the organization.

The current situation can be scary, new, and frustrating—which makes now a good time to point out to staff that clients may feel the exact same way. They too are trying to adapt to a new situation that forces digital interaction and tools on them that they do not feel savvy on how to use. Creating the connection of empathy and caring can ease the transition to introducing new client management and interaction processes and tools. Finally, any communication in an organization is valuable data, and now that most of it is happening via digital collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Slack, those tools will help you more efficiently manage the conversations and topics employees raise as well as help you identify and tag critical information to process or address.

An aftermath of the pandemic is that it has helped companies to overcome one major barrier of change or adaptation: sense-making and the feeling of urgency. You are less likely to encounter questions such as: Why should we use this new customer relationship management system if Excel sheets work just as well? or Why is it important to rethink the customer journey? Leverage that dynamic and channel it into momentum to foster critical areas of digital transformation in the organization.

Another clear trend that has emerged is an increased awareness and perceived importance of and for soft or social skills: communication, emotional intelligence, agility, resilience, empathy, mindfulness, and intuition. In virtual environments, traditional management and leadership approaches don't work as well, if at all. Therefore, the TD function can step up to offer the necessary training and development resources. While you may have faced pushback to implement a learning management system and provide virtual training, and while focus points on leadership may not have been a priority in the past, they most certainly are now.

Now is also the perfect time to critically assess the array of skill- and competency-development content the TD function already has and curate it for a more digitally driven, on-demand approach to acquiring and sharing knowledge company-wide.

Get in the middle and guide

The TD function is critical to the success of any digital transformation initiative because your team is instrumental to the business and performance aspect of it. Your organization is likely trying to adapt to shifting and changing conditions. In fact, your team holds all the keys to defining which and how digital tools and technology can support the strategy and employees' and the company's goals most effectively.

I already mentioned the importance of providing digitally enhanced on-demand and highly relevant skill and development initiatives across

the organization. But there are other areas that you can tackle at the same time, which likely have been a pain point for your company for some time: recruitment and onboarding.

If there ever were a time to move away from the costly and often ineffective approach to hiring and onboarding and instead focus it on an individual's skills and abilities to learn and grow within the company, it is now. Instead of focusing solely on a person's resume, experience, or acquired degrees, push to recruit individuals who show skills such as curiosity, creativity, agility, and adaptability. Any person who has those skills will also have the ability and willingness to learn. An employee can always acquire hard skills, but what the individual cannot acquire or develop so easily is a mindset.

Also consider exploring new (digital) ways to recruit and onboard talent, such as via simulations or interactive case studies. They are powerful, engaging, and a wonderful method to have future talent experience (virtually and digitally) the job or the client's role and engage and empower them from day one. Those strategies also give a behavior-based assessment of a candidate, showing you their skills, abilities, and mindset in one glance. Such practices will close skills gaps and reduce turnover, which result in higher engagement and lower costs.

can better align the performance data you collect (as well as the way you collect it) with the organization's new key performance indicators and business metrics. Because the TD function is trying to create a digital environment for individuals to learn, grow, and exchange knowledge and information, its proverbial finger is on the pulse of what employees are thinking and talking about, which is of high relevance and importance for the organization's decision makers.

Lead the way
To support digital transformation initiatives and create a culture of performance and resilience, the TD function should be at the core of the change on how the company aligns career, knowledge, and skills. Your team is critical to transforming the workforce and making each individual digital ready and digital savvy. Therefore, tackle it effectively.

Assess the skills of all individuals independently of their role or function in the organization. That does not mean changing your assessment methodology (at least not necessarily, as long as it is a valuable method for skill assessment) but widening the assessment scope while at the same time focusing it on skills. In doing so, you change your perspective and thus automati-

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Now is the right time for the TD function to step out of the shadow of other business functions and get more proactively involved in the strategy-setting and implementation process. The time for big data has passed; it is all about smart data now.

You can actively influence the way the organization collects and uses data, because the TD function is at the core of how people look at, understand, and use it. It also means that you

cally remove a wide range of biases that may have formed over time. That is a critical first step, because to transform anything and move forward, you need to first know exactly where you currently are.

Create job or role descriptions that are skill and competency based, centered on processes and tasks. Here's an example: In the industrial setting, take the role of machine operators (individuals who operate equipment)

and maintenance operators. If your company is in a digital transformation process, successfully performing those tasks means an employee needs to operate updated and more data-driven equipment as well as properly manage and leverage the data to make the right decisions by monitoring the new software and training people in statistical process control. So, add those skills to the job description and then rename the functions as line data technician and process support technician, respectively, to reflect the changes in tasks.

The wording alone makes a difference, but it needs to be future oriented and forward looking so it can incorporate new trends and needs related to the role or function (skills that the role needs to succeed in the future). It also enables the company to create job titles that are more engaging.

By applying that type of lens on where the road is headed and what skills the company will need to move in that direction, you can align talent journeys and career paths with an agile and proactive organizational strategy.

Align the two previous steps. Putting individuals with the right skills in front of the jobs and tasks that align with those skills will set them up for success from the get-go. You'll create more engaging and empowering career paths. Also, the process will surface what skills still need to be developed across functions or roles. That will create the synergy and enterprise-wide approach to TD that you are aiming for.

Model the change

DigitAll360 has successfully implemented the above approach across various organizations during the past 25 years and has found that doing so will foster a mindset of skill development, lifelong learning, and rediscovering of skills and abilities. It works independent of culture and the generation of the workforce. The approach is one size fits all, which is the only way a transformation process can work. You will enable individuals to take ownership of their career and learning journey—and by creating achievable goals and journeys, you focus on transforming and growing, not replacing.

The TD function is the keystone of digital transformation and should act as the organization's role model. How? By fostering a mindset of (re)discovering and continuously

growing and developing skills and competencies. By supporting the business and performance initiatives that the company must take to execute a holistic digital strategy and related operational processes. By transforming people so you can transform the organization.

And after you take those steps, by implementing tools and technology to support the above. That approach requires a forward-looking skill- and competency-based process that realigns employees with tasks and roles and that the TD function applies from recruitment and onboarding all the way to continuous development and lifelong learning.

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