



Skills-First: What Does It Mean for My Organisation?

Charting Out Possibilities for a Virtuous Ecosystem

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Contents

Preface	5
Abstract	6
Introduction	7
Defining Skills	9
Understanding the Context for Skills-First Evolution	11
Closing the Gap on Skills	17
Conclusion	23
Glossary	26
References	27
Authors	29
Editors	30

Preface

Globally advanced economies and developing economies are grappling with issues related to economic sustainability and competitiveness amidst externalities and domestic challenges. As a corollary, human capital development and future-skilling have come to the fore on the policy agenda. Often however, issues such as skills mismatch of the economically active and enterprises' inertia to transform their businesses pose challenges to advancing these policy objectives. For the most part, stakeholders have begun to realise that more needs to be done to close the nexus between the supply and demand of skills for the economy. This has resulted in numerous efforts across the globe focusing on skills-based and skills-first conceptions, practices and debates.

Singapore is one of the economies that is enthusiastic about building a skills-first economy. We, from the Office for Skills-First Practices, at the Singapore University of Social Sciences-Institute for Adult Learning, decided to convene global and local experts to kickstart the Skills-First Working Paper Series. The aim is to evoke discussion and identify progressive organisations and individuals to lead change and forge enduring skills-first practices. In particular, the Skills-First Working Paper Series emphasise an ecosystem approach to tackle interconnected structural inefficiencies. The line-up of the series is as follows:

- #1** Skills-First: Are We There Yet? (Published on 19 May 2025)
- #2** Skills-First: What Does It Mean for Me? (Published on 21 July 2025)
- #3** Skills-First: What Does It Mean for My Organisation?
- #4** Skills-First: Policy and Impact
- #5** Skills-First: Opportunities for Collective Action
- #6** Skills-First: A Framework for Action

This third paper, “Skills-First: What Does It Mean for My Organisation”, highlights the impetus for employers to pay attention to skills, and in particular how to deploy and apply skills at the workplace. The paper further acknowledges the inherent challenges and offers ideas to overcome them, calling for employers to embrace skills as its key business strategy.

Each paper will be accompanied with a roundtable discussion to deliberate ideas and distil possible skills-first practices for prototyping.

We aim for the Skills-First Working Paper Series to serve as an important conversation starter to align thoughts on how to approach skills-first from an ecosystem perspective, as well as a springboard for experimentation of needle-moving solutions. We would like to express our gratitude to the co-authors who made time to pen the papers and the participants of the roundtable discussions for their generous sharing.



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Skills-First initiative

Abstract

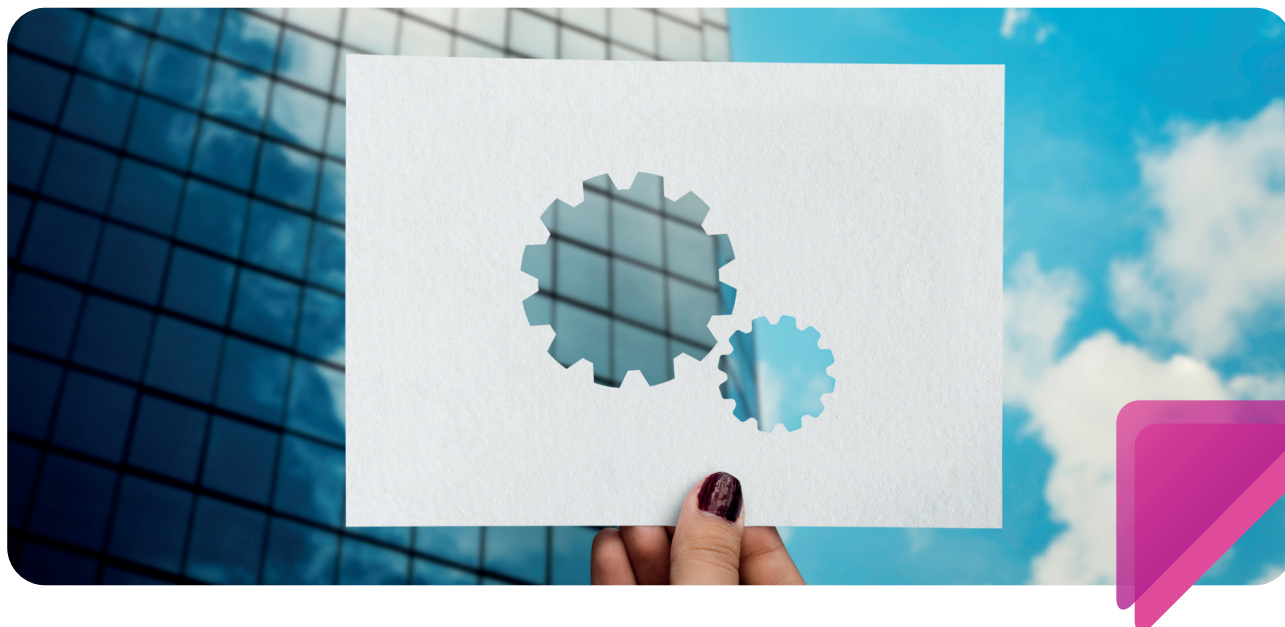


This paper extends the Skills-First Working Paper Series by examining how employers understand and engage with skills-first practices in real-world conditions. It is intended to support employers in kickstarting their own journey towards a skills-first organisation that enables greater performance and resilience by sharing ideas from the ongoing global experimental practices of various forward-leaning employers. The paper begins by defining what “skill” is, then explores the external and internal contexts shaping the move towards skills-first practices, such as artificial intelligence (AI) disruption, demographic shifts, workforce agility, and organisational incentives. It offers ideas for closing common design gaps through practical examples across different companies and contexts, including how to reframe skills as strategic assets, rewire people processes, and rethink skills-based rewards. The paper concludes with key reflection questions for employers and highlights the collective role of employers, employees, educational institutions, and government in building a skills-first ecosystem.

Introduction



Introduction



This paper extends the Skills-First Working Paper Series by examining how employers understand and engage with skills-first practices in real-world conditions.¹

It is intended to support employers in kickstarting their own journey towards a skills-first organisation that enables greater performance and resilience by sharing ideas from the ongoing global experimental practices of various forward-leaning employers.

The paper is structured as follows:

Defining skills

How should employers think about what skills are and the implications to their businesses of that definition

Understanding the context for skills

What employers should know about skills and the external business environment in relation to skills

Closing the gaps on skills

What ideas can employers draw inspiration from in the journey towards becoming skills-first

Conclusion

What questions should employers ask in defining their own journey

¹ In Working Paper 1 "Skills-First: Are We There Yet?", skills-first practices are defined as practices that "consciously prioritises the identification (or articulation), acquisition, demonstration, use of skills, and the recognition of skills as the central aims of workforce development" (Gog, Sung & Sigelman, 2025).

Defining Skills



2

Defining Skills

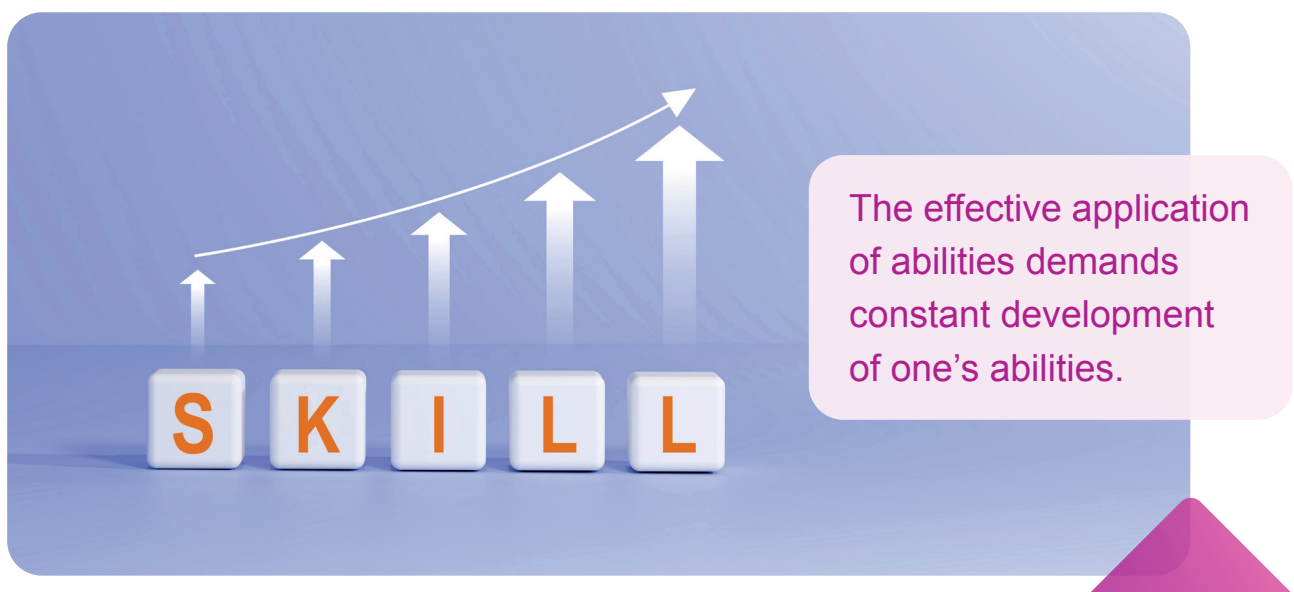
It is important to have a shared understanding of what is meant by “skill”.

As Jesuthasan and Kapilashrami (2024) put it, a skill is a “learned and applied ability that uses one’s knowledge effectively in execution or performance”. This definition is critical as it provides two practical points of guidance:

1. Identifying possession of skills is not enough—skills are not directly related to qualifications or one’s potential; it is about the successful application of knowledge to solve real-world problems and deliver impactful outcomes.
2. Applying requires continuous learning—problems and outcomes required by businesses are constantly changing, the effective application of abilities demands constant development of one’s abilities. The best way to help people learn is to build it into the work itself.

These points are worth highlighting as they require employers to overcome a fundamental challenge today around skills which is that the inference of skills—typically from resumes, job titles or training records—are static, or at best, lagging. In addition, companies that are able to develop skills and competencies through work activities or on-the-job-learning will emerge much stronger than those who do not.

It is also important to note that performance is not solely dependent on skills. One’s mindset, motivation as well as environmental factors such as tools provided, bureaucratic obstacles or even luck play a part in the final impact one may be able to make. But having the right skills is an essential pre-requisite to a thriving career.



Understanding the Context for Skills-First Evolution



Understanding the Context for Skills-First Evolution

With skills defined as “effectively applied ability”, we need to explore two dimensions of context on skills.

The External Context for Skills

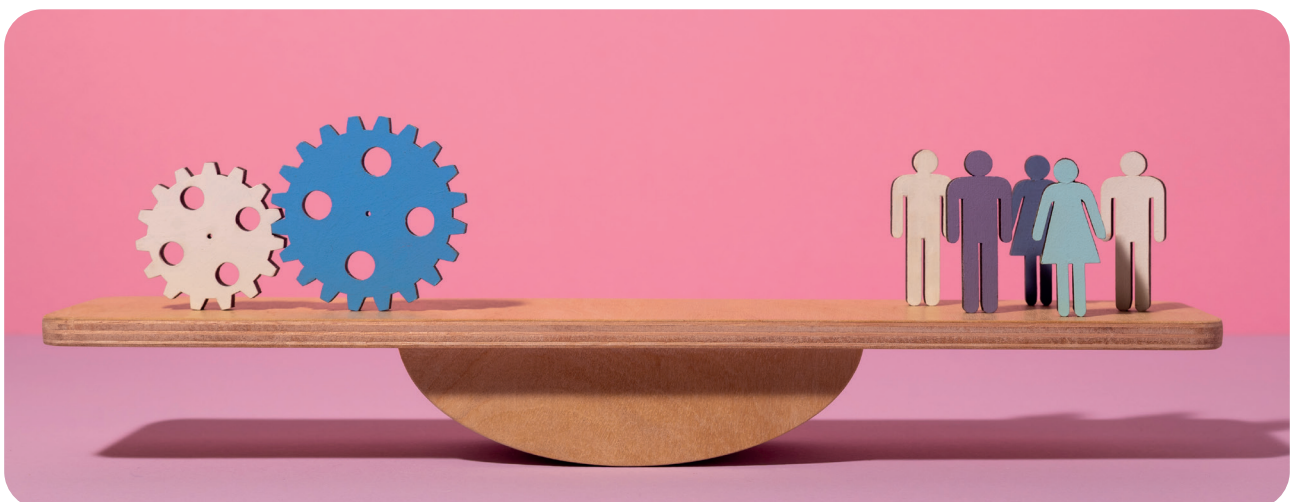
The dynamism and velocity of four key changes are creating an external context for greater focus on skills rather than the “individual headcount” in an employer’s workforce—or put differently, the external context increasingly requires the precision and granularity of skills over the fixed structure of headcount or traditional job roles.

AI disruption and the future design of work

AI is both enabling as well as requiring employers to redesign processes towards greater productivity, and even reshape their entire business model to achieve outcomes once considered unattainable or cost prohibitive. This transformation is not just about adopting technology; it is about rethinking how work is structured, who performs it, and downstream implications.

Work design is therefore not a one-off exercise but an ongoing and iterative process.

At the core of this is a change in the type of work that employees will do, which in turn requires changes in skills.



The external context increasingly requires the precision and granularity of skills over the fixed structure of headcount or traditional job roles.



Concentration risks

With increasing geopolitical uncertainties and economic fragmentation, employers need to consider concentration risks not just in their operating markets and supply chains but also their workforce.

Anchoring on skills rather than roles or headcount allows employers greater flexibility in sourcing (internally and externally) tangential talents, including locating and deploying skills-to-work rather than individuals-to-jobs, which naturally reduces the workforce concentration risks.

For this to work, employers need to know what skills they already have, what they will need in the future and strategies (build-buy-borrow-bot²) to close the gap.

Demographic shifts

Ageing societies as well as different generational expectations towards work similarly nudge employers towards a focus on bringing in, developing and retaining the necessary skills and experience. This also allows multiple non-competing employers to tap into an individual's expertise at the same time and share the cost of employment.

Focusing on skills allows an employer to tap into the best of what these demographic shifts offer, instead of fighting against a rigid employment construct that ultimately affects the individual the most.

² The traditional "build-buy-borrow-bot" framework refers to a talent acquisition and development strategy where organisations prioritise internal talent development first, followed by external hiring, contingent workers, and finally automation. While the 4B framework has been around for nearly a decade, today's talent landscape is experiencing "a fundamental shift away from automation" where organisations increasingly view technology as augmentation rather than replacement for human capabilities, reflecting human talent alone cannot scale effectively (Lennon, 2024).

Return to skilled trades

Whether because of technological advances, changing taste and preferences, increasing desire for the joy of creativity, or declining supply; there is a growing demand and greater willingness to pay for high-quality artisanal, technical, and craft skills.

Many of these trade skills are essential services of any economy and will continue to need human dexterity as well as creativity to excel in these areas.

Long overlooked in favour of more visible, credentialed paths, the return to skilled trades is a critical evolution in the external context, with important implications for talent planning and economic resilience.

Whether because of technological advances, changing taste and preferences, increasing desire for the joy of creativity, or declining supply; there is a growing demand and greater willingness to pay for high-quality artisanal, technical, and craft skills.



The Internal Context for Skills

Within the internal context, it is imperative for employers to consider two things:

Building the ecosystem for skills application

Recalling our definition for skills being about effective application, employers need to ensure skills are not pursued in isolation but developed as part of an ecosystem comprising:



Skillset

How is the organisation's demand for skills evolving? What skills does the employee need to develop and deepen over time?



Mindset

How can the organisation re-envision how talent is seamlessly connected to work based on the skills they have (rather than the jobs they are in)? How do we create a mindset of continuous upskilling and reskilling with employees?



Toolset

What tools and resources can the organisation provide to enable the seamless development of employees and their application of skills to work?

Availing resources and opportunities at workplaces to deploy and hone skillset-mindset-toolset are essential for companies and employees to do well.

Reframing and incentivising skills

Two elements are critical—how skill gaps are viewed, and how the closing of skill gaps are incentivised.

First, a reframing of how skill gaps are viewed—not as a sign of failure—but as an increasingly normal by-product of the organisation’s growth (think of the inverse, if there is no skill gap, the business is probably stagnating) will unlock employees’ willingness to rapidly identify, embrace and take action to act on their own skill gaps.

Second, beyond helping unlock employees’ own willingness and motivation, employers need to find new ways to incentivise skill development; potentially even shifting away from traditional models of compensation that are typically still grounded in job hierarchy. This may include additional allowances for specialised skill mastery.

Additionally, incentives need not be solely monetary and can include advancement, stretch assignments, or new roles—essentially creating a virtuous cycle where the monetary rewards are a natural consequence of the continued pursuit of opportunities for skill development and excellence.



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Closing the Gap on Skills



Closing the Gap on Skills



With a definition and the context around skills clear, we intend for this paper to offer ideas to employers on their journey towards becoming a skills-first organisation. To make this more helpful, we have chosen to anchor the ideas against the six common design gaps we have identified.

1. Investment in skills competes with other business costs

In many organisations, investment in skills competes with priorities like digital transformation, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), and growth. Especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), skill-building may be seen as discretionary and detached from business performance.

To gain traction, skills-first efforts must be reframed as part of a company's strategies and skill-building should be done in the context of the growth trajectory of the company and in parallel to transformation strategy.

OCBC (Singapore)



OCBC views internal capability as a strategic asset. Its MOBI platform matches employees with their career interest areas based on skill fit, not job history. To address skill gaps, employees can approach a trained Growth Coach or sign up for Vybes which are short-term project-based apprenticeships situated in daily business operations. These interventions supercharge workforce performance in alignment with business goals.

2. Skills do not reflect the evolving needs of the business

Existing and perhaps latent skills can point towards new opportunities for the business if employers can recognise and tap into them effectively—organisations must ask not only “What skills are required for our strategy?” but also “What strategies can we pursue with our skills and capabilities?”

Prince's Landscape (Singapore)



Prince Landscape is creating the role of “horticultural specialist” to elevate trade skills as complex, creative, and promotable; which ultimately creates a different value proposition to customers. Inspired by Swiss-German craft models, the role blends technical, interpersonal, client-facing and team-leadership functions. Hiring is based on mindset; progression is structured.



Organisations must ask not only “What skills are required for our strategy?” but also “What strategies can we pursue with our skills and capabilities?”

3. People processes overlook skills; specificity of skills needs context

Existing people processes are still largely designed for qualifications, not skills. This inherently limits the potential talent supply.

Designing processes and mechanisms across the whole employee life cycle to explicitly seek out skills will enable employers to access new talent supply in a resource-constrained environment.

Skills without context are too broad. For example, what does having good communication skills mean? Is the person great at conflict management or crisis communications? In the world of AI, some forward leaning companies have started to test complex models (up to 700 attributes) to extract and infer skills from performance feedback, job descriptions as well as experiences.

IBM and Dell (US)



IBM's "new collar" roles in cybersecurity and design are filled not through degrees, but performance-based credentials from bootcamps or community colleges. Dell rewrites job descriptions to emphasise mindset and capability over academic background, and partners with alternative providers to accelerate inclusion. Both show how aligning towards skills and not pedigree, can close the lag between strategic intent and execution.

Google Summer of Code and Rabbit Hole Project (US)



Google bypasses conventional filters by identifying actual skills through application. Summer of Code matches developers (no degree required) with open-source projects; the Rabbit Hole project recruited engineers through hidden puzzles in search results. In both cases, demonstrated performance—not the background of the individual—was the hiring gateway. These models surface hidden talent by valuing what people can do, not where they come from.

Unilever (UK)



Unilever replaced CV screening with AI-based assessments, gamified tests and structured interviews focused on skills such as problem-solving and learning agility. This shift halved hiring time and expanded the applicant pool fivefold.



4. Educators and employers are in their own silos

While most skills are developed at work, young talents are often only recognised by their educational qualifications. The lack of integration between learning providers and businesses limits visibility, reduces alignment and slows momentum for both hiring and skill-building.

Crafting common skills taxonomy between higher learning institutes and employers as well as a stronger push for joint-curriculum planning, study-work arrangements or skills-based apprenticeships will narrow the gap.

Cleveland STARs and Community Partnerships (US)



Cleveland's regional strategy supports STARs—workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes organised by Opportunity@Work—by removing unnecessary degree filters, instead having employers validate skills locally, using skills-based tools to match talent to jobs in alignment with regional economic strategy, and partnering with colleges and workforce boards to create the necessary upskilling pathways.

Lithan Academy (Singapore)



Lithan Academy supports SMEs' upskilling through business digitalisation. It deploys a systematic process of developing digital blueprint and in parallel the development of upskilling and reskilling plans. Learning is closely integrated with the business digitisation process, with skills developed through online learning and mentorship support.

5. Skills are rarely linked to rewards

Many firms say they want to be skills-first. But most reward systems still favour tenure, credentials, or static roles. We should prototype alternative reward systems based on successful application of skills to achieve desired business outcomes.

Cragar Industries (Singapore)



Cragar is piloting a skills-first pay system where 20–40% of compensation is tied to demonstrated skill proficiency within operations, production and supply chain teams. On top of that, performance reviews incorporate learning milestones as one of the factors in evaluating performance. The desired result is to make frontline talent at Cragar more visible and better recognised for the skills they bring to their roles.

6. Companies are not maximising the skills available in the organisation

When companies tag employees into a role or a job, employees will tend to only do work that is tagged to their job description. These types of practice reduce the ability to use the full set of skills that an individual may have. For example, a mechanical engineer may have a gift in visual arts but may never be called to work on a creative project because of the role that he is employed into. How might we gain deeper visibility into the skills that already exist within our workforce and optimise all the skillsets available in a responsible way?

Grab (Singapore)



Grab advertises many opportunities on their GROW platform, welcoming teammates who do not necessarily have the right “experiences” to apply for these gigs so that they can showcase different aspects of their skills or build new ones through project participation. Employees can also actively seek mentors from different job families if they are interested in learning about and contributing to work in a vastly different field.

Conclusion



5

Conclusion



Skills-first for employers means that the organisation embraces skills as one of the business strategies amid transformation.

Building a skills-first organisation starts with having the capability to effectively identify their skills needs that are aligned with both present and future business requirements. Once the challenge of identifying skills is addressed, companies should know which skills to develop, motivate their people to build them in a timely manner, maintain a dynamic inventory of workforce capabilities, and deploy these skills through work processes, using skills to support business transformation or to enable new business models.

To move from idea to adoption, we conclude by offering four questions for employers to reflect on, consider and act upon within their organisations.

? Reflective Questions

- 1. How are you integrating skills with your business strategy? Does business strategy drive skills development, or is business strategy shaped by skills available, or both?**
- 2. Have you designed your people processes and systems to uncover skills and accelerate the flow of skill-related signals across the organisation?**
- 3. How are you influencing the skill development of talent prior to your hiring?**
- 4. How are you incentivising continued skill development across your workforce?**

One final closing thought—achieving real skills-first approach requires the whole ecosystem of employers, employees, educational institutions and the government to be activated around anchoring on skills as a common currency in the world of work.

This requires a shared understanding of

- **what skills are needed (demand)**
- **how skills can be continuously built (development)**
- **where do skills exist (recognition)**
- **how skills can be best applied in teams and work (deployment)**
- **how flexible and supportive are policies around maximising skills use (fluid supply)**
- **what motivates employers and employees to adopt skills-first approach (rewards)**

Our hope with this series of papers is that we ignite the creation of such an ecosystem, where education providers co-design with firms, platforms coordinate data flows, and intermediaries validate performance in real time. As more actors contribute, data flywheels emerge. Matching improves. Innovation scales. Employers perform. Workers thrive.

Our opportunity is not to fix a broken pipeline. It is to build a new one—where skills are developed, applied and rewarded; growth is continuous; and the value of human potential is more fully realised.

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Glossary

Artisanal Skills: Skilled manual or technical work involving dexterity, craftsmanship, and creative judgment (Munck, 2019).

Capability: The integrated combination of skills, mindset, and access to the right tools that enables individuals to contribute meaningfully to organisational outcomes. It reflects not just what individuals know, but how they apply that knowledge effectively in dynamic business contexts (Ybarra, 2023; Yin, 2021).

Hidden Skills: Competencies or growth potential that remain unrecognised in traditional Human Resource systems due to their reliance on traditional qualifications or job histories. These skills can be surfaced through practical demonstration, performance feedback, or AI-enabled inference models (Forbes Human Resources Council, 2022).

MOBI: An internal talent mobility platform of OCBC that matches employees to career interest areas based on demonstrated skills rather than academic qualifications or tenure. It enables broader participation in career progression and supports a skills-first culture within the organisation.

Performance-Based Hiring: A recruitment approach that prioritises demonstrated ability over formal qualifications. Candidates are evaluated through task completion, simulations, or project contributions that reflect real work requirements (Bina et al., 2021; Campion et al., 2019).

Skills-First: A skills-first approach represents a distinct orientation that consciously prioritises the identification (or articulation), acquisition, demonstration, and use of skills as the central aims of workforce development—including recruitment, job design, learning and career advancement (Gog et al., 2025).

Skills Signalling: The process of communicating one's capabilities to employers, peers, or institutions through evidence of applied work, portfolios, micro-credentials, or verified performance. Effective signalling supports better matching between people and opportunities (OECD, 2025).

Skills Visibility: The degree to which an individual's skills can be identified, recognised, and trusted by employers, educators, and labour market systems. High skills visibility enables more accurate talent matching and fairer access to work opportunities, especially for individuals without traditional credentials. It often relies on mechanisms such as digital credentials, portfolios, verified assessments, and workplace demonstrations (Athey & Palikot, 2024).

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