



**Skills-First: What Does It Mean For
My Organisation?**

Roundtable Insights

3

Key Insights



The Office for Skills-First Practices (OSP), under the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), has launched a six-part working paper series to spark dialogue, surface fresh perspectives, and co-create practical solutions for building a skills-first ecosystem in Singapore.

The third paper in the series, *Skills-First: What Does It Mean for My Organisation?*, explores how employers can embrace skills as a complementary business strategy. It highlights the need to embrace skills as a common language to support business decision-making. It also urges organisations to build internal capability to leverage skills to achieve business performance goals. Drawing on local and global examples—from OCBC’s internal mobility platform to Unilever’s AI-driven hiring—the paper outlines practical interventions to close ‘design gaps’ in workforce development. To deepen the conversation, a roundtable session was convened on 3 September 2025, bringing together 18 local and international experts and panellists, 70 in-person attendees and 142 online attendees. The session served as a platform to reflect on the paper, share experiences, co-create solutions, and identify pathways for collaboration.

The session had three segments: first, a recap of the gaps organisations face in embracing skills-first practices and a discussion of the desired behaviours for organisations to overcome these gaps; second, a breakout session where participants were divided into four different groups to co-create interventions to enable and sustain the desired organisational behaviours, and third, a final segment where panellists discuss the proposed solutions from the co-creation sessions. Online attendees submitted their ideas on Slido where the highest upvoted solution was selected for the panellists to discuss.

The roundtable discussion centred on two focus areas:

1

Reviewing the Desired Behaviours of Organisations

2

Co-creating Interventions to Enable and Sustain the Desired Behaviours of Organisations

This executive summary distils the key insights from the roundtable discussion.

1. Reviewing the Desired Behaviours of Organisations

The roundtable began by recapping the six gaps that organisations face, described in Working Paper 3, i.e. competing business priorities, misalignment between skills and evolving business needs, overemphasis on qualifications, siloed relationships between educators and employers, weak links between skills and rewards, and companies not maximising available skills in their organisation. These gaps hinder organisations from fully recognising and deploying skills as strategic assets. In unpacking what it takes for organisations to enable a more agile, productive, and skills-enabled workforce, a list of desired behaviours was proposed for discussion, where the behaviours serve to guide organisations to integrate skills into their business and people strategies:

During recruitment – prioritise attitude-skills-capability over qualification and other factors

1. Articulate job description using Singapore job-task-skill taxonomy
2. Identify the in-demand and emerging skills required for the role
3. Design ways for applicants to demonstrate their attitude, skills, and capability

During work design/redesign – in time of anticipated job requirement changes in tandem with business and operational requirement

4. Keep track of employees' skills-capability
5. Prepare employees for job content changes and/or new job roles by creating personalised learning plans
6. Support employees transition through skills development and coaching

During skills development and skills use – in time of transition

7. Deliberate in support employee's role transition (e.g. changing role due to business and personal requirement)
8. Pre-emptive upskilling and reskilling
9. Provide work projects to support new skills use
10. Offer person-centric skills development opportunity
11. Offer job role-skills development pathway options

Skills recognition

12. Monitor skills inventory within organisation
13. Mobilise employees for work/projects based on skills
14. Recognise skills proficiency
15. Motivate employees to upskill through rewards and compensation

Need to revisit traditional job architectures

The discussion focused on the evolving nature of work and the need for organisations to adopt a skills-first approach. Panellists emphasised the geopolitical and economic risks, potential for chronic skill shortages if businesses rely on recruitment rather than training and the need for a fluid work operating system. There is a need to **revisit traditional job architectures** and seek alignment in intent between employees and the organisation. Achieving this necessitates a paradigm shift in approaching hiring and performance appraisal which positions skills at the core of organisational strategy rather than ancillary concerns.



A shift from traditional role-based models

A recurring theme was the need to shift from role-based model to tasks-skills-based model for greater agility supporting transformation. This includes linking functional tasks to business operation and skills required, deploying talent based on capability rather than tenure or qualifications, and redesigning work to match evolving business needs. For example, OCBC and Google developed unique internal talent marketplaces to provide opportunities for employees to practise and apply their skills to projects on a short-term basis.

Google has deployed initiatives for talent mobility and reskilling which involves programmes like Bungee which are 6-month projects that encompass 20% of an employee's time, or G2G (Googler-to-Googler learning) which are employee-led training programmes. These initiatives foster psychological safety and collaboration which are central to learning.

Similarly, OCBC created internal “gig projects” that span several weeks to months. This arrangement reduces talent hoarding and enables employees to explore different job roles without risk, since they retain their substantive positions and are insulated from the potential downsides of mismatched job fit or performance setbacks. These initiatives also allow employees to activate dormant skills.

One of the panellists also highlighted the growing relevance of artisanal skills, which makes good use of the talent marketplace concept.






Skills-first practices across the organisation

Skill-first practices encompass recruitment, work design, skills development, and recognition, yet current hiring and compensation often lag changing business needs. Work operating systems that were developed 150 years ago is no longer relevant today. A skills-first approach requires measuring performance by skills and potential, backed by cultural change, stronger job architectures, and collective action across leaders, HR, managers, and employees. If hiring is skills-based, compensation should be too. While contingent workers are paid for skills, full-time staff often are not. Line managers, with the clearest view of roles, should handle pay and promotion discussions. Such practices motivate employees to upskill by ensuring their skills are applied and rewarded.

A panellist proposed modular skills assessments to reduce cost and uncertainty barriers for SMEs, whose resources are often tied to daily operations rather than long-term skills investment. Such assessments offer a flexible entry point, though salary increases should be calibrated against skills obsolescence.






Another panellist suggested structured apprenticeships or internships to let candidates demonstrate skills and assess cultural fit, while helping graduates discover passions and avoid later misalignment. Crucially, opportunities to showcase skills should extend beyond interns, as full-time staff are often more motivated and retained longer when able to take on projects that fully use their abilities.

Following the initial discussion, participants were invited to vote on the desired behaviours of organisations to identify which were perceived to be the most important yet hardest to tackle. The voting exercise surfaced the following five behaviours as the top priorities for deeper exploration:

- 1 Design ways for applicants to demonstrate their attitude, skills, and capability
- 2 Identify the in-demand and emerging skills required for the role
- 3 Pre-emptive upskilling and reskilling
- 4 Mobilise employees for work/project based on skills
- 5 Recognise skills proficiency

2. Co-creating Interventions to Enable and Sustain the Desired Behaviours of Organisations

The following are interventions co-created by participants during the breakout sessions:

Desired Behaviours	Interventions to Engage and Sustain the Behaviours
<p>Design ways for applicants to demonstrate their attitude, skills, and capability</p>  <p>Identify the in-demand and emerging skills required for the role</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of technology to identify skills based on job description and how to acquire skills • Provide a framework to integrate the various work streams for business needs and skill requirements • Delegate recruiting to managerial staff who have more expertise on the required work
<p>Pre-emptive upskilling and reskilling</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide rewards and clear pathways for employees for upskilling • Drive skills-first language and provide supporting resources • Develop Industry and Queen Bee-led use cases and frameworks • Map business strategy to future skills needed and the current skill stock of all employees • Provide job redesign training for staff
<p>Mobilise employees for work/projects based on skills</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redesign solutions to enable mobility • Onboard management, staff, and HR to drive organisational culture change
<p>Recognise skills proficiency</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a platform for organisations to discuss skills perception (Community of practice) • Develop a common language/code book • Cultivating an organisational mindset shift

Key Interventions from the Co-Creation Session

These interventions highlight the need for **culture change**, **integrated HR systems** that link performance with skills, and **transformation efforts** that align current and future business needs with workforce capabilities. Broad-based skills development should start by planning backwards from desired outcomes and cascading required competencies across the organisation. Clear communication of a skills-first approach helps secure employee buy-in and align efforts with the organisation's mission.

Transformation can begin with pilots in select units or temporary role swaps that let employees apply a wider range of skills. Ultimately, success depends on collaboration among leaders, HR, government, and educational institutes to align training with business needs.



The need for a skills-first ecosystem

A key recommendation was to introduce signalling mechanisms that recognise skills proficiency beyond formal qualifications. While educational institutions help build the talent pipeline, organisations must design systems that validate and reward skills development through human-centric recognition, including intrinsic motivators such as career growth and purpose. One suggestion was a flexible wage system that links pay to skills relevance rather than accumulation, encouraging employees to continually upgrade. If organisations hire for skills, they must also pay by skills. Panellists further proposed **linking performance-first conversations with skills-first initiatives** to align business goals with workforce capabilities.

The “TaskRabbit” ecosystem was a point of discussion where it involves outsourcing modular tasks to interns or part-timers, freeing a company's core team to focus on higher value work. This ecosystem reduces hiring cost and risk while allowing on-the-job testing.

In-demand and emerging skills

Skill development should extend beyond current organisational needs. One panellist stressed the importance of preparing for jobs that do not yet exist, raising the question of whether this should be a strategic priority. Government agencies can support by providing insights on future job trends, while intermediaries help identify and nurture emerging skills. This forward-looking approach keeps organisations agile, though panellists cautioned against over-prioritising any “single must-have” skill. Instead, strategies should reflect ecosystem thinking and embrace a broad skill mix.

Organisations must also assess whether their operating models enable adaptation to in-demand and emerging skills. By re-evaluating traditional job architectures, they can adopt skills-based hiring and compensation, shifting from rigid roles to a more fluid, capability-driven system.

Collectively, these efforts signal a genuine commitment to innovation, growth, and a shared ecosystem of workforce development.



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To view the full working paper, please visit <https://www.ial.edu.sg/about-ial/osp/paper-3>



