

# THE SKILLS ADVANTAGE

A Human-Centered, Sustainable, and  
Scalable Approach to Reskilling



**ANISH LALCHANDANI**

# THE SKILLS ADVANTAGE

*Skills have become the new currency of work. When people are aware of skills required, apply new skills, and act with agility, they deliver high performing organizations. This excellent book offers insights and tools for reskilling that help people and organizations be effective.*

—*Dave Ulrich*, Rensis Likert Professor of Business, University of Michigan. Partner, The RBL Group

*The Skills Advantage provides a timely and comprehensive guide to addressing the challenges of reskilling in today's dynamic business landscape. Anish's dual perspective as a business leader and practitioner creates a holistic approach that aligns skilling efforts with strategic goals. The emphasis on collaboration across HR teams and practical insights from successful organizations make this book an invaluable resource. This is a must-read for leaders seeking to drive impactful reskilling initiatives and individuals looking to thrive in the evolving world of work.*

—*Dr Marshall Goldsmith* is the Thinkers50 #1 Executive Coach and New York Times bestselling author of *The Earned Life*, *Triggers*, and *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*.

*In 'The Skills Advantage', Anish Lalchandani takes his readers on a journey of exploring the building blocks necessary for business success in a rapidly evolving age of AI and digital disruption. Starting with an introduction that sets the stage for why new thinking in skills development is crucial, the book puts theory into action. It covers the entire spectrum of strategies from skills identification and development to deployment and measuring effectiveness, providing readers with actionable steps to implement a successful reskilling transformation in their organizations. The author's deep business expertise combined with a forward-looking perspective make the book an actionable guide and a must have resource for*

*professionals seeking to lead their organizations in today's fast changing world of business.*

—*Dr Anna A. Tavis, Department Chair, Human Capital Management, New York University*

*Do you know that the skills you learned today will be obsolete in four years? Do you know how to identify and acquire the skills that are in demand and will make you successful? Do you know how to use data and AI to help you learn faster and better?*

*If you answered no to any of these questions, you need to read this book. It will teach you how to use data and insights to focus your reskilling efforts and measure your progress.*

*It is time to rethink your career as a series of skill-based projects and opportunities. This book gets you started.*

—*Abhijit Bhaduri, GM, Global L&D, Microsoft, Author of Career 3.0 & LinkedIn Top Voice with a million followers*

*Combining human-centered design principles, research, and broad industry insights “The Skills Advantage” is a compelling read with a reflective approach, examining how skills shape the future of work. The book equips HR professionals (and beyond) with practical frameworks to navigate change. Highly recommended read for leaders seeking to embrace the skills revolution, the book offers actionable insights and encourages thoughtful introspection for driving adaptive and people-centric strategies in the face of disruption.*

—*Karina Cuello – Global Head of Talent, Careers, JLL*

*This timely book makes a compelling case for the importance of reskilling and upskilling people for the future: a must-read for any business leader interested in future-proofing their talent*

—*Tomas Chamorro Premuzik, PhD, Chief Innovation Officer at ManpowerGroup and Professor of Business Psychology at University College London*

*Many companies have talked about creating a ‘Skills First’ approach with their workforce but struggle to understand the practical steps required to take and sustain that position.*

*Anish Lalchandani gives a comprehensive and complete picture of what that involves not least by reflecting on powerful cross sector industry insights that provoke ‘Aha’ moments. Implicit in all of his thinking is the mind-set shift and culture change required for traditional line managers to become effective people leaders.*

*I can thoroughly recommend *The Skills Advantage* for the curious HR or Business Leader interested in understanding what’s required to make the ‘Skills First’ shift a worthwhile and relevant change in their organisation.*

—*Stephen Lochhead*, Chief Talent, Culture and Learning Officer  
ex Expedia, Unilever, Walmart & Standard Chartered Bank

*As the world pivots from jobs to skills as the currency of work, this insightful book gives us the road map for navigating this complex yet essential journey.*

—*Ravin Jesuthasan*, Bestselling Author and Globally Recognized  
Thought Leader on the Future of Work

*In this convergence of humanity with a programmatic approach to skills, Anish challenges the very idea of work and lays down inclusively practical strategies that connect people’s authentic value with work.*

—*Giselle Mota*, Chief of Product Inclusion, ADP

*In the future, the ability to reskill and upskill will be an advantage for organizations, countries, and individuals. The emphasis on awareness, application, agility, and alliances will be cornerstones of a vision for a healthier talent ecosystem. As a Global Talent Leader, Anish is perfectly positioned to guide leaders on how to develop a successful reskilling strategy.*

—*Andrew Spence*, Publisher of Workforce Futurist

*As change accelerates in the world of work, reskilling of the workforce is an imperative. Organizations need the skills to upskill and reskill. This excellent book provides the knowledge, insights, and frameworks for those serious about delivering the agile response required to meet the reskilling challenge.*

—Dr Simon Mac Rory, award winning author, Academic and  
CEO of the Guardian Service Ltd.

*In this book, Anish provides a compelling argument for a laser-like focus on upskilling and reskilling our current and future workforces. His practical advice will guide all groups involved in skills development to ‘stay within the rails’.*

—Charles Jennings, Director, Duntroon Consultants and  
Co-Founder, 70:20:10 Institute

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and Scalable Approach to Reskilling

BY

ANISH LALCHANDANI



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India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To all those who are courageously reskilling.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Anish Lalchandani** is an internationally recognized HR Leader, Author, and Global Thought Leader. He is renowned for his innovative approach to people development, skills, culture, and transformation. Over the past two decades, Anish has been shaping the future of work by strategically connecting insights and trends and developing strategies for a future-ready workforce.

A distinctive impact of Anish's work extends from developing experiential learning initiatives focused on people development to accelerating talent and enhancing leadership capabilities. His work encompasses talent development and integrating sustainable diversity and inclusion practices across multiple industries.

Throughout his remarkable career, he has held generalist, specialist, and transformational leadership roles at some of the world's most prestigious organizations, such as A.P. Moller Maersk, Standard Chartered Bank, Jones Lang LaSalle, General Electric, and other organizations. He is a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD Institute, a certified Coach (ICF, ACC), and a Mental Health First Aider (MHFA, England).

Anish is recognized as one of the Top 25 Thought Leaders on HR and the Future of Work by Thinkers360, Top 200 biggest voices in Leadership by Leadershum, featured on the 2023 Asia HRD hot list and HR Global 100 by HRD. He is a sought-after speaker on future skills, workforce transformation, and talent management, and his thought-provoking talks inspire audiences and drive meaningful conversations.

In addition to his corporate journey, Anish extends his leadership to nonexecutive roles, serving on boards and committees for organizations such as the Bone Marrow Donor Programme, Singapore and the Singapore Institute of Directors.

Based in Singapore for the last 17 years, Anish's career has taken him across Asia, Europe, and the United States. These experiences have enriched his global outlook and deepened his appreciation for diverse cultures.

Learn more about Anish Lalchandani at [www.anishlalchandani.com](http://www.anishlalchandani.com)

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# INTRODUCTION

## SKILLS ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BUSINESS

How many combinations can you create with six standard Lego bricks (rectangular  $4 \times 2$  bricks)? Well, I am not looking for you to be a math genius, but think for a minute and imagine the possibilities – you could create a linear tower, a flat surface, a small bridge. . . the list goes on.

What if we add a few constraints? For example, now you can only create a linear or a flat structure. What happens then? You'll now need to find some different ways to organize the Lego bricks, right? A sphere is out of the question, but a bridge is fair game. With interlocking bricks, it is possible to quickly adapt to changing rules, but what about business models? Would it be easy for businesses to adapt to such constraints or disruptions?

The tsunami of disruptions can sweep away entire businesses. Artificial intelligence (AI) and other technological advances are changing business models and impacting how work is done and organized. This is, in turn, impacting jobs. To understand the impact of this, we conducted a skills project survey in 2023 that ran across 20 countries. We found that 69% of people expected their jobs to change within 1–2 years, but only 51% of the people shared that their organizations are, indeed, encouraging them to upskill and reskill.<sup>1</sup>

I wish we could have a Lego-like system to work with, to avoid succumbing to redundancies and layoffs!

In the backdrop of business transformation, the future of work is also evolving constantly, and skills have become the new currency of work. We can't deny the importance of skills and how they influence the future of work. In the last few years, there has been a massive focus on where people work, i.e., the workplace, and how hybrid work arrangements are gaining popularity. But there are not many books on “how we work” and even fewer resources substantiating how reskilling their people can be key differentiators for organizations.

But skills also have a half-life – with constant shifts in market dynamics, there is always a changing demand for new and future skills. New technologies and new ways of working require constant reskilling.

Lego wasn't always the household name it is today. They started with wooden toys, then moved to plastic bricks, and even that went through constant evolution. Their interlocking bricks laid the foundation for most of the models that are available now. Unlike many other toys that have fixed functionalities, Lego sought to revolutionize play by introducing an innovative and flexible system to develop imagination and creativity in children. In fact, “Lego” in Latin means “I put together”, which perfectly captures the brand's core philosophy.<sup>ii</sup>

Think of each brick as a skill, and how we might stack skills to organize work, structure jobs, and actively function in agile teams. Because when people acquire new skills and effectively put them to use, it opens a world of possibilities.

So, did you think about the number of combinations that would be possible with six Lego bricks? It's 915,103,765 combinations!<sup>iii</sup> And that is just with six Lego bricks! Imagine the possibilities when there are many more bricks in the equation.

Just like Lego bricks for play, skills as building blocks create infinite possibilities for business.

Instead of wishing for a Lego-like system, first, we need to think about how we can create “the skill advantage” for our business. As you aspire to transform your businesses and are innovate to be market leaders, how can you navigate the complexities and win by creating the skills advantage? Having an advantage increases your chances of winning, but that does not guarantee victory – essentially, you also must create the right conditions for people to learn, grow, and thrive.

My intention with this book is to spark new ideas and connections to help you create a human-centered, sustainable, and scalable skilling strategy as a business and HR leader. In addition, I hope it will encourage you to not only develop such strategies for your organization but also create a lasting impact in your communities and countries by inspiring others on this path.

It took me nearly 3 years to write this book. I thoroughly enjoyed the writing process, as it provided great clarity, helping me analyze different perspectives about the challenges we routinely face in the industry, and explore and capitalize on opportunities at the same time.

## WHY DO WE NEED A NEW WAY OF THINKING?

The goal of the World Economic Forum is to reskill one billion people by 2030<sup>iv</sup>. This requires a collective effort to reskill our workforce. With so much focus on reskilling, we have started to see financial investments being made by organizations and national agencies to further this aim. However, while researching and engaging with senior leaders, I realized that there exists a significant challenge in achieving the right impact. The investments are not translating into creating the right impact around reskilling. There is intention, but short-term focus or lack of knowledge leads to growing frustration. The complexity is also increasing as we are now dealing not just with a few individuals who need to be reskilled but with diverse teams representing a huge proportion of the workforce that requires reskilling. Does this resonate with you?

If you are grappling with some of these dilemmas as a leader, this book will provide you with inspiring ideas and the cornerstones to build the foundation of your skilling strategy along with practical steps and resources to implement it.

You will get a business leader's perspective by evaluating the business trends and cases shared in this book and creating value in alignment with the business strategy. At the same time, you will obtain a practitioner's perspective in the field of transformation and skill development that brings forth learnings and best practices to enhance your skilling strategy. As organizations grow, HR teams become specialized, and that can lead to a fragmented approach to skilling. Designing and implementing a reskilling strategy requires collective efforts. Therefore, throughout the book, you will discover the theme of connecting dots across various HR teams.

Additionally, you will find insights from experiments and instances of approaches taken by organizations that can serve as practical guidance. Converting these examples into simple frameworks can help you understand the nuances better so that you may implement them as strategies in your business. You will see several practical examples from Unilever, Next Jump, Generation, Standard Chartered Bank, and other organizations that highlight their wins and challenges.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THE BOOK?

As I started writing this book, I reflected upon the kind of books I like. And the easy way to assess was to consider the kind of books I had finished reading, enjoyed rereading, and made copious notes from – to generate novel ideas and apply them to possible frameworks.

So, I wanted to write an engaging book that has a good balance of stories (names anonymized) and examples that make it an enjoyable read. This is my humble attempt to bring esoteric concepts to life and, in the process, learn and reskill further. You will also be able to access additional resources to gather insights and integrate your learning by reflecting and implementing it in your work.

Whether you are starting your career or are an experienced industry leader, you will find nuggets of relevant information to apply to your work.

The book is structured in three parts, each delving into distinct aspects of the subject matter. Let's explore how these sections unfold:

### Part A: The Business Imperative to Reskilling

In Part A, we explore how the disruption loop is impacting business models. Digitization and the influx of new technologies has shortened the life cycles of businesses and, in some cases, even shown how new and innovative start-ups are challenging well-established business models.

The use of new technologies for hybrid working has changed the way we live and work now. COVID-19 may have influenced these new practices, but now, with newer collaborative technologies and copilot apps, the way we work is swiftly evolving.

Multiple shifts are happening simultaneously. We see new roles emerging to meet ever-advancing organizational needs. On one end, they reimagine remote work arrangements and facilitate cross-functional development. Conversely, several jobs have become obsolete and vanished with automation and AI. In addition, we see new ways of working with agile, human-centered design, and other frameworks evolving and challenging the very basis of how we have collaborated and worked in the past. These shifts warrant a new way of thinking about how we organize work, which, in turn, requires us to rethink the approach to reskilling.

People are the key differentiators for an organization, not their products and services. We will further explore how a “people-first” approach and focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion can be game changers for organizations. The focus on employee experience and what matters to employees is becoming even more critical. With access to vast networks and information, candidates are not only more aware of what is stated in an employee value proposition but also of what to expect. The focus on career development and alignment to purpose is critical for employees and has become a key deciding factor when evaluating opportunities.

Purpose-driven organizations are increasingly leaning toward creating superior employee experience, offering flexibility in work arrangements, development options, and even workforce planning. To do this in an integrated and agile manner requires rethinking our employee life cycle from the perspective of skills – for example, hiring employees based on skills, establishing skills as the foundation for development pathways, upskilling, and taking reskilling initiatives.

## Part B: The Cornerstones of Reskilling

In this part, we will dive deeper into the issues we are facing today for reskilling. In my conversations with multiple business leaders, I realized that we face several skill-related challenges, and the complexity continues to grow as we wait for a silver bullet to solve these. If I summarized these challenges, it boils down to the fact that current skilling strategies are not creating the desired impact, and the second problem revolves around the ownership of skilling and where it sits.

Do these issues resonate with you?

We will explore the root cause of these challenges to ensure we design our reskilling strategy to address these.

Return on investment (ROI) on skill-building and how we justify it always gets attention. We explore and refocus the discussion from ROI to value creation and business outcomes. As we make the connection to business outcomes, we see a clear path to designing a reskilling strategy based on the four cornerstones – Awareness, Application, Agility, and Alliances – that set a firm foundation for a reskilling strategy.

For a human-centered approach to reskilling, we need to put our people at the center of what we do. We need to understand their career preferences, interests, values, and their purpose. Creating *self-awareness* is the first step toward aligning individual needs with what the organization expects. We will explore how awareness can help create a path of success for reskilling. The challenges around motivation, lack of time, etc., can be avoided if we adopt a human-centered approach to skill-building.

When people are motivated and find company goals aligning with their purpose, they invest wholeheartedly in their skill-building. To make this process effective, we need to double down on the *application* of what they learn. Leaders and organizations must create opportunities for employees to be able to apply their knowledge and skills. That is when active learning takes place. This will not be possible if we don't provide a psychologically safe space for employees to learn, where we encourage failing and offer consistent feedback to build skills.

How should we scale our approach as reskilling in many cases is now required for entire teams and departments? We also know business needs to keep evolving, and this, in turn, impacts the required skills. If we also add an element of personalization to align with individual needs, the complexity increases. An *agile* approach that uses technology and data can help overcome these complexities. Experimenting, learning, and adapting to the changes will ensure that your skilling strategy is future-fit and that it continues to evolve in line with business needs.

Now, as we look at all the cornerstones, we realize that this change requires a lot of effort. In fact, it needs collective efforts from leaders, organizations, agencies, industries, etc. Building *alliances* across various stakeholder groups and sharing the learnings and resources is critical for us to solve this adaptive challenge. However, all these efforts will go to waste if we lack engaged, motivated, and well-informed employees in the driving seat.

## Part C: The Reskilling Strategy

In Part C, we will explore the practical steps to design and implement a reskilling strategy. Planning the key deliverables, deciding who needs to be involved, and how we can ensure that all dependencies are mapped are critical. As mentioned earlier, an iterative approach ensures that there is

agility in how you plan, depending on where you are, be it in sprints or phases.

If you are just starting on the journey, framing a business case would require some thinking. The business, finance, and people imperatives for a skilling strategy should be evaluated. As you would deal with multiple stakeholders, each with different questions, having a comprehensive understanding of key drivers and skilling needs is important.

We will further explore how to identify emerging skills at an organizational or business level. Depending on your specific needs, you may choose to initially focus on one area of business and then gradually expand to other areas in a phased manner.

With the emerging skills defined, the focus needs to shift toward skill development. You may need an organization-led programmatic skill development approach to address emerging and declining demands. At the same time, to ensure that we cater to individual needs, a more flexible and personalized approach is required. We will explore how these approaches coexist and what can be done to ensure that these processes and transitions are sustainable.

The work doesn't stop at skill development – deploying skills in high-demand areas is where we start to see the impact. This requires a new approach to how we hire and how HR teams work and collaborate across different areas. Measuring the effectiveness of skill identification, development, and deployment will provide early indications that the approach is working and areas where we can make improvements.

Now that you have got a sneak peek into the scope of the book and know what to expect, let's get started. You would benefit from reading the chapters in sequence; however, the chapter covering cornerstones can also be read first, based on your area of interest.

## Terms of Note

There are several different words used to describe the approach to skills, such as upskilling, reskilling, etc. Let's understand two of them:

*Upskilling:* When an employee undergoes learning to expand their existing skill set, this learning is known as upskilling. These additional skills enhance

the worker's performance in their current role, potentially advancing them in their career path.

*Reskilling:* Employee reskilling involves learning new skills beyond the worker's existing skill set. These skills are often adjacent to their current function but may sometimes be geared toward a different path entirely.<sup>v</sup>

The approach and strategies for upskilling and reskilling are similar but not the same. This book focuses primarily on reskilling; however, most of the strategies can also be applied to upskilling initiatives. In fact, there are enough books on upskilling, but not on reskilling. In this book, you will find the focus on skills identification, development, and deployment, more nuanced for reskilling. Reskilling is hard; it needs employees to learn new skills outside their areas and for organizations to identify areas for reskilling, develop the skills, and look at placing people into it. Reskilling is a bold endeavor compared to upskilling, and we need additional aspects to consider for that.

Reskilling is not only for the Learning and Development (L&D) teams' responsibility, there are several teams involved in reskilling within HR. This includes – L&D, Talent Management, Talent Acquisition, Organization Development, Organization Design, Workforce Planning, Analytics, Rewards, HR Business Partners, etc. Now, depending on the size and specialization of an organization, these responsibilities can be divided or compartmentalized into one or many teams. What that means is that there is a need for strong collaboration across teams and also a need to gain knowledge and skills across different domains within HR. To ensure simplicity, I have referenced “HR teams” as a generic term in the book. Practitioners from all these areas will find the book useful.