

# Plugging the skills gap beyond the workplace

The skills gaps debate is not new. In fact, we have been talking about it for over 10 years. Digitalisation has meant that, while new roles are created, old ones are increasingly at risk. The Covid-19 crisis has added pressure to the labour market and made the need to close the skills gap more urgent.

Amid furloughs and retrenchment taking place globally, upskilling and reskilling are shifting to the top of the priority list for companies. Employees are looking to retain jobs and employers are looking to invest in meeting their talent needs. Governments around the world are encouraging this by proactively building provisions for upskilling into their fiscal stimulus plans.

To prepare the workforce for a post-pandemic world, it is not enough to focus on digital skills, but to cultivate deeply human skills. This “human difference” is how the workforce of the future will thrive. “Robots” will take care of the technical,

repetitive and manual aspects of work, leaving us room to exercise creativity and solve important problems. That is why we need to build skills that complement the “robot”, for example, building trust in data, agility, relationships and leadership, ability to influence and resilience. And these skills are not acquired overnight.

In this fifth and final article in the Restart Malaysia series, we explore what is needed to foster a society that embraces lifelong learning. The government, corporates and educators have a role to play through tighter public-private collaborations. By working together, we can achieve the scale needed to empower people to take part in a more equal, inclusive and sustainable world.



## TRUST IN Resilience

BY NURUL A'IN  
ABDUL LATIF

### Infinite learning as part of the larger upskilling movement

We see employers adapting to the requirements of the digital economy by expanding their candidate pool, hiring gig workers, or reskilling and upskilling their current workforce.

At PwC, we have invested in upskilling through a global initiative called “New World. New Skills.” to realise our purpose “to build trust in society and solve important problems”. We believe everyone should have the opportunity to learn, work and participate in the new world. A big part of the upskilling movement is adult — or infinite — learning.

In our recent “Digital resilience in a new world” survey on technology, jobs and skills, 70% of respondents from the Malaysian public believe technology will change their current jobs

in three to five years, but only a third (38%) said they are given many opportunities by their current employer to improve their digital skills outside their normal duties. But we know there is a keen appetite for upskilling — 85% would learn new skills now or completely retrain to improve their future employability. Innovative learning programmes can be developed to help employees become skilled technological leaders, even if they do not necessarily come from a technical background. These programmes can be designed as intensive training courses to build skills and understanding in using digital tools, from data visualisation to bots.

You would expect to see increased productivity, of course. But, by framing these upskilling initiatives as a problem-solving quest, where we stand to gain the most is in the shift in attitude towards learning as a tool to prepare for the challenges of the future. Developing a workforce

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with the digital and transferable skills you need — and the ability to adapt quickly in a world of constant change — does not happen organically or by accident.

Within PwC, we are seeing results from our first cohort of the Digital Accelerator programme, a citizen-led innovation initiative allowing our people to use digital tools to create solutions that can help the business, from process improvement to productivity measures. This approach allows us to harness our people's enthusiasm in applying their new-found skills to solve a problem, and measure outcomes regularly to see progress.

And with the launch of PwC's Academy, we offer training programmes to help organisations upskill their people in the area of finance and operations, digital, governance and risk, among other specialist areas, to thrive in the digital future.

## Enhancing learning between education and industry

Workforce planning to close the talent gap is an exercise requiring foresight. To hire employees with the right skillset to fulfil our productivity potential as a nation, we need to look at the graduates feeding into the workforce. This could start with a shift in education models and focus on developing skills for future careers. Public-private collaboration can help pave the way.

Within the existing system, we definitely see benefits to students' having industry exposure before they graduate. But if we want students to transition to employment "fully formed", educators should also be equipped with up-to-date knowledge. It is said that textbooks go out-of-date once they are published. Perhaps sabbaticals where academic staff spend a year in industrial placements to solve a relevant business issue can help ensure that they bring the latest industry developments back to the classroom.

Businesses, too, have an imperative to engage with institutions of higher learning to co-create programmes that embed digital and other crucial human skills within colleges and the workplace. A number of public and private universities around the country have existing programmes in place, where organisations work with students, led by academic staff, to solve a business problem. These initiatives may provide greater scope for creativity and innovation beyond a formal internship programme. The question lies in how we can extract further value from this arrangement.

Such collaborations could be expanded into university spinoffs, for example, in the form of start-ups that commercialise products of business-academic partnerships. The government can incentivise businesses to partner with educa-

tional institutions to encourage projects that contribute towards sustainable economic development. Projects can be chosen based on their potential to create STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) jobs or for societal impact.

## Mindset for continuous learning starts in school

We need to ask ourselves: Is our current education curriculum still relevant to prepare students with the digital and human skills they need for the future? Does it foster digital inclusion across the various school types in Malaysia? This extends to teachers who may not have sufficient time, recognition or opportunities to develop their own digital skills to be able to impart the right knowledge to their students.

Public-private initiatives can help, especially for education-focused not-for-profit organisations such as Teach for Malaysia and EdNation that are working to address education inequality and empower teachers to provide the best learning experience. To do what they do every year, they require sponsorship from companies, but to scale their effort to impact more lives and make these changes sustainable, they need government support. At PwC, we have partnered with Arus Academy, in a programme supported by the state education departments of Kedah, Perlis and Sarawak, to help teachers adapt their lesson plans to be delivered through digital platforms as part of our upskilling strategy.

Keeping the upskilling momentum going, especially as schools are back in session, is part of the Covid-19 recovery journey. With schools operating on different models of physical and online learning, there are likely large swathes of the student community who continue to be affected by the disruption to their education. It is important that teachers continue to receive support in digital-led teaching so no one is left behind.

## In conclusion

We need to invest in creating a society that is open and able to apply continuous learning as they enter the workforce, and throughout their career. Businesses, the government, educators and organisations need to work together to bridge the gap for the skills we need for an increasingly complex digital future.

Beyond that, we need to ask ourselves what we can do to create a workforce that leverages technology to create sustainable economic development and contribute to nation-building. Investing in people can transform them from passive observers of disruption to active leaders of positive change in their local, regional and global communities. ■

**Nurul A'in Abdul Latif is markets leader at PwC Malaysia**