

**SKILLS
FOR LIFE**

Lifelong Learning

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D2L develops software that makes the learning experience better. Our cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is the leading learning management system (LMS) for blended and fully virtual learning. It is easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, schools can personalize the learning experience for every learner to deliver tangible results. Brightspace is used by learners in K-12, higher education, and the corporate sector, including the Fortune 1000. Learn more about D2L for schools, higher education, and businesses at D2L.com.

Introduction

For the last decade, warnings about the future of work and the changing skills demands brought on by technology and automation have been sounding. The response has been a patchwork at best, tinkering and experimenting with solutions while the demand for new skills moved at breakneck speed. [D2L published three whitepapers](#) over the last few years discussing this shift and the importance of preparing national systems of learning to keep workforces resilient and able to adapt.

However, the rapid onset of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) got to our jobs faster than automation did and has effectively shuttered the global economy. As the pandemic stretches on, it is becoming increasingly likely that many businesses and associated jobs will not revive until economic activity is able to resume at full capacity.

We already know that an ‘all-clear’ to restart the economy will not be a simple return to normal though we all wish it were so. Instead, a ‘new normal’ will be ushered in, slowly but surely, with dramatic implications for the businesses that do re-open, especially for their employees. The jobs workers were forced to leave at the start of this pandemic are likely to be quite different as everyone - consumers, employers, workers - and systems alike adapt to a new normal. The ability of our workforce to adapt to the realities imposed by returning to life amid a pandemic will be the true test of the resiliency and adaptability of our national economies.

There has been much talk about how to prevent a depression and limit the impacts of the recession(s) caused by the COVID-19. There needs to be more discussion about how we revive our economies in a world that has fundamentally changed. The new normal begs us all, at last, to stare the change that has been coming long before the pandemic in the face and make real and lasting preparations for the future of work.

COVID-19 has brought about an unprecedented hit to the global economy. It has also brought about perhaps the greatest upheaval to our relationship to work than at any other time since the first Industrial Revolution. The last decade has provided example after example of what can work and study after study of the importance of retraining and skills development, of lifelong learning, to the economy. Circumstance has accelerated the need for action.

To adapt to a new normal, to seize the opportunities that do exist amid the upheaval, lifelong learning must be properly enabled. It is imperative that communities, regions, and countries make strategic investments in redesigning today’s learning systems into systems of lifelong learning that will best position them and their workforce in a globally competitive environment.

Our Systems of Learning Today

Traditionally, we have separated life into three distinct phases—learning, work, and retirement. Outside of a select few professions, learning ceases when we enter our work phase and apply our knowledge over the course of a 40+ year career. It is in this phased life model that our systems of learning – higher education and employer-based training – took their current form. The younger population receives an “upfront” education and terminal degree from the education system and then moves into the work phase.

In the last decades, these clear distinctions between learning, working, and retirement have served only to stunt individual economic opportunity (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017) and our national economies’ ability to adjust and diversify as the world changes (World Economic Forum, 2016).



Declining Lifespan of Job Skills

Historically, our technical, job-related skills learned in our “upfront” education have stayed relevant long enough to support us throughout our entire careers, with minimal additional learning needs even between employers. Today, the half-life of those job-related skills is five years or less (Kasriel & Upwork, 2017).

As technology and automation have become more sophisticated, the job skills that would sustain us across our whole career are being increasingly and rapidly overtaken. Even skillsets previously thought to not be automatable have succumbed, such as welding, machining, and accounting. Future forward careers aren’t immune either. In the computer programming field, the evolution of technology has now begun to replace human programmers for basic coding tasks (Shah, 2020).

Automation will continue this path of task consumption going forward and will only get faster.

To stay relevant, we will need to be continually upgrading our job skills to stay one or two steps ahead of our technology-enabled competition or to make wholesale career shifts. To stay employed, we will need to be able to shift from one job to another and even from one industry to another.

The Rise of Durable Skills

As globalization and the rise of technology and automation are dramatically undercutting the lifespan of job skills, it has placed a premium on those skills not easily replicated by machines. Typically referred to as “soft” skills, these are the durable skills that are never outdated and contribute to an individual’s adaptability, interpersonal interactions, and resiliency (D2L, 2020).

The value of durable skills in the job market is growing to rival the value of the job skills an individual may possess. Many senior leaders in companies have even come to view durable skills as more important than a candidate’s job skills (Lefkowitz, & Pate, 2018). Individuals who have the underlying durable skills can be taught and retaught job skills more easily as needs, jobs, and careers change over time.

The adaptive mindset instilled by durable skills brings an ideology of bend, not break, in adapting to new working environments.

Despite their growing value in the job market and critical importance to companies, employers are reporting that durable skills are more difficult to find in candidates (LinkedIn, 2019). Individuals coming out of today’s education pipeline are either not receiving these skills or are unaware that these skills were taught.

Increasing Lifespans, Longer Careers

On top of the skills shifts increasingly placing our employment at risk, global life expectancy for individuals today is rising. Between the years 2000 and 2016, average life expectancy has risen 5.5 percent (World Health Organization, 2018). In Latin America and the Caribbean, life expectancy

has had a particularly dramatic rise in the last few decades from 66.5 years in 1985 to over 75 years today (World Bank, 2018). As we are growing older as a population, we are also starting to spend more time in the workforce (OECD, 2019), requiring us to weather more turnover in jobs and be at risk for task and skill redundancy even longer.

Lifelong learning and the Learning-Integrated Life

COVID-19 may be the catalyst forcing the vast majority of us to rethink our relationship to work today but those relationships were changing for some time. Whether due to automation, the shift towards the gig economy or the demands of younger workers who value experience more than loyalty to one company, a lifelong career based on the credentials attained to secure the job in the first place is going out the window. Embracing lifelong learning as a basic right mitigates the uncertainty that technological change (or sudden change of any kind) has brought to bear on workers.

Creating learning as a lifelong endeavor though is not just doing the same traditional learning for a longer period of time and more often. It is a fundamental shift in thinking and approach.

Lifelong learning in the broadest sense is a learner's continual, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge and skills development through life; whether for personal or professional reasons. Beginning with education at the primary and secondary level, lifelong learning is putting greater focus on the opportunities for education and training through adulthood (pre-, during, and even post-employment) that lead to specific outcomes of employability, career fulfilment, and personal growth.



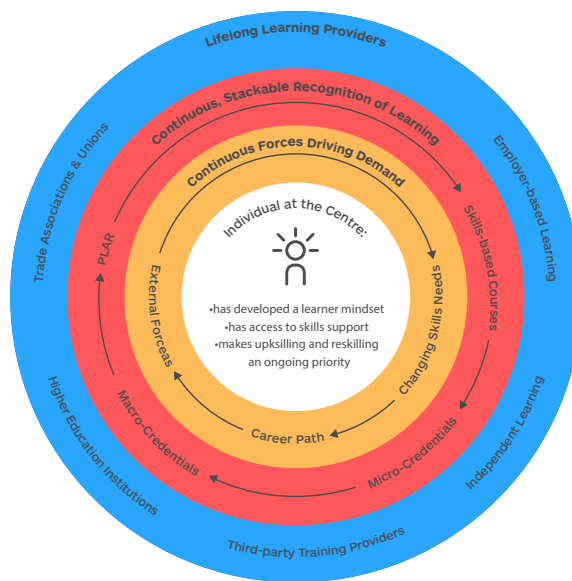
Learning-Integrated Life

To realize this vision of lifelong learning, government and our existing systems of learning must encourage a “Learning-Integrated Life” – a societal concept where individuals are always in a learning mindset and intensive and episodic opportunities for learning are woven through the fabric of each person’s life without gaps; preparing them for successful careers and rich life experiences.

Enabling a learning-integrated life requires individuals to be equipped with the tools and support to understand their current and future skill needs and to develop deliberate learning pathways with various providers—higher education, employers, associations, etc.—to acquire them. The benefits of lifelong learning are then understood and shared among individuals and employers, across society, and the economy at-large.

Figure 1. Learning-Integrated Life

A continual journey of ongoing learning and skills development as the enabler of employability, success, and purpose



A Learning-Integrated Life underwrites a strong economic imperative, as lifelong learning—when easily accessed and effectively delivered—has proven to increase earnings and help the unemployed return to work, while improving performance, productivity, and employee retention (ICF Consulting, 2015). It also reflects the intrinsic value of learning in our lives and to our wellbeing, as shown in studies that identify clear benefits to mental and physical health, self-confidence, life satisfaction, and civic participation (ICF Consulting, 2015).

To lead a Learning-Integrated Life though requires that one has the permanent mindset of a learner and access to a system of learning to capitalize on that mindset.

Learning Mindset

For the most part, today's global society is not one of constant learning. We have a learning mindset (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2014) through our formative childhood years and pre-employment education (i.e., primary, secondary, postsecondary). Once in the workforce though, our mindsets shift from one of a learner to one of a worker—typically not re-engaging in intentional learning unless mandated by employers or by necessity (e.g. unemployment). Skills and knowledge that we obtain over our careers and life tend not to be recognized explicitly as learning, but more as something that happens to us—it is passive rather than understood, proactive learning.

Box 1. What is a Learning Mindset?

Related to the 'growth mindset' of a traditional student, a learning mindset is an individual's self-identification, regardless of age, as a learner and their recognition that learning is never a finished task.

A worker mindset on the other hand is a recognition that an individual is done with, or even incapable of, new learning. Individuals with a worker mindset may not recognize non-formal learning or daily information gain as real learning.

The learning mindset must persist throughout our lives regardless of our participation in the workforce.

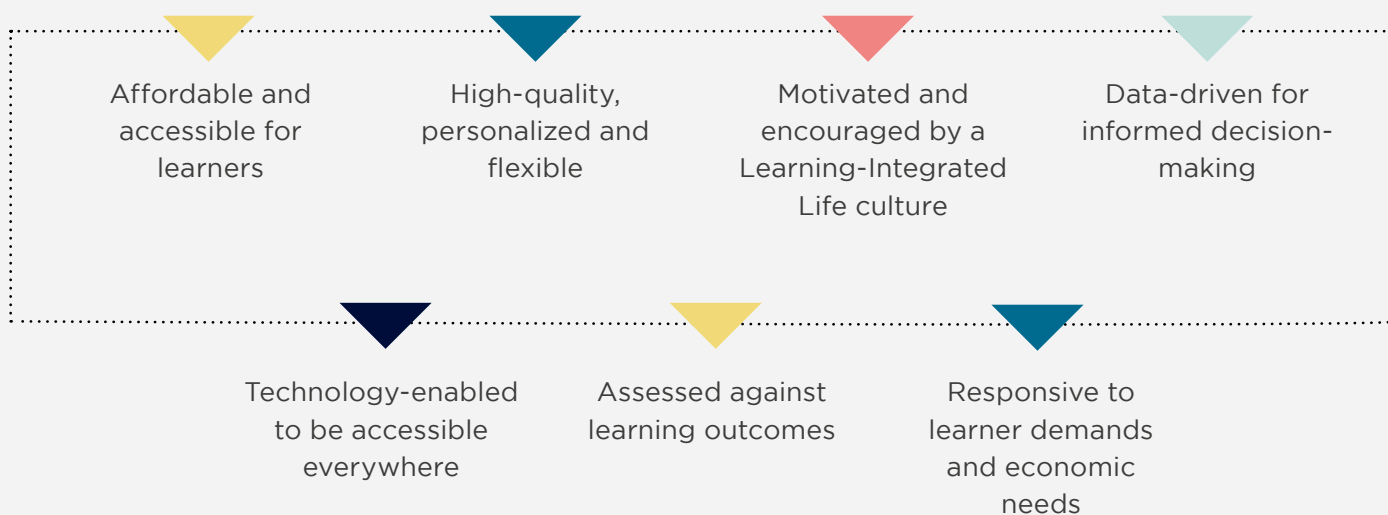
System of Lifelong Learning

Armed with a learning mindset, we then require a learner-centric system of lifelong learning designed with entry points based on our existing skills, experiences, knowledge, and abilities; along with exit points based on our personal learning pathway. It must be flexible enough to meet varying life circumstances, including family and work commitments, and affordable to ensure the benefits are inclusive.

The predominance of the traditional degree as the primary labour market signaling function is changing as employers increasingly seek specific and verifiable durable and job-specific skill sets in potential employees. A system of lifelong learning will increasingly value the ongoing, stackable accumulation of skills that may be gained through formal learning but also informal, unstructured forms of learning.

In recognition of this paradigm shift, our current models of learning – both higher education and employer-based learning – must be redesigned to achieve a true system of lifelong learning (D2L, 2020).

A series of practical principles should guide this redesign:



Critically, inclusive access to learning must be a foundational principle upon which a system of lifelong learning is developed. Learning has the potential to be a great equalizer if it is inclusive; alternatively, it can also widen gaps if it is not.

Implications for Latin America and the Caribbean region

Due to COVID-19, economists are forecasting a recession for Latin America and the Caribbean that will rival the economic collapses of 1914 and 1930 (UN News, 2020). Governments are understandably focused on the here and now, shoring up their economies and healthcare systems. The implications of COVID-19, whether they are in the form of a recession or other structural changes to the economy, are taking root now too. If we do not take steps today to instill the Learning-Integrated Life in our culture and redesign our systems of learning to be accessible for everyone and able to rapidly adapt to learner and employer needs, any recession caused by COVID-19 is likely to persist. The necessity of investing in the Learning-Integrated Life and building a true system of lifelong learning is more critical today than it has ever been.

When the global economic engine starts moving again, individuals in countries that do not adapt will be further behind their peers in countries that made lifelong learning investments. The jobs and economic opportunities of the future will grow where the workforce has the tools and access to learning to be resilient to change.

Recommendations to Achieve National Systems of Lifelong Learning

Create a national imperative for the Learning-Integrated Life and a strategy for creating learning opportunities for adults, with special attention to low-skilled and disadvantaged individuals

A strategic vision for a cohesive system of learning, accessible by everyone, is necessary to drive change at scale and to garner buy-in from key stakeholders.

A national strategy should consider programs of direct support to working individuals through new models of portable, personal learning credits or training accounts to help them define their

own learning paths, regardless of their current employment status (e.g. employed, unemployed, gig worker). Importantly, digital infrastructure gaps, such as internet and device access, must be considered in a national strategy to ensure learning is tangibly accessible as well as financially accessible.

Address the demand for learning through new, flexible models of higher education for learners of all ages

With their pedagogical prowess, expertise across a vast range of fields, and capacity, higher education institutions are well-positioned to address the growing demands for lifelong learning at scale.

In new models, students should not be considered as one-time learners for a capstone degree, but as

lifelong, active participants in learning. Creating a more accessible marketplace of learning, based on skills, could offer new models of engagement for individuals such as a lifetime or annual learning subscription for skills development.

Develop more industry-led learning partnerships

Industry-academic co-design of programs have shown compelling benefits for workers, employers, and educational institutions. Industry-led partnerships with labour organizations offer similar potential in preparing new workers and upskilling existing workers for changing technologies and business processes. While these partnerships require boldness, investment, and experimentation, they are an important element in a more demand-driven, employability-focused learning system.

Co-designing learning programs with educational institutions should be careful not to lead to the relegation of all learning to dedicated learning entities, such as higher education institutions, or to the offloading of learning responsibility entirely to individuals. Employer-based learning and employer-provided learning opportunities are a critical component to a healthy system of lifelong learning.

Develop models for assessment and recognition based off what already works

An effective, scalable system of lifelong learning must be built upon reliable and verifiable signaling mechanisms (e.g. micro-credentials,

certifications, degrees, etc.) for skills, experience, knowledge, and abilities that are recognized by employers in talent management decisions, and thus valued by individuals.

A stakeholder group, including employers, higher ed institutions, and workforce stakeholders, should be convened to develop a framework for micro-credentials that will create a common understanding of their components, scope, how they are issued, how they are verified, and how they can be digitized and made portable.

Reinforce the Learning-Integrated Life imperative and increase its relevance

Most working-age adults do not regularly see themselves as participating in learning as they don't consider themselves to be learners or in a learning phase of life. Changing this “non-learner” mindset is a central challenge. Efforts to engrain the learner mindset in individuals should start at an early age and continue through adulthood.

The Learning-Integrated Life should be embedded as a cross cutting theme into education curricula starting in primary and secondary education. Learning pathways and the importance of lifelong learning for personal economic success should be promoted through PSA-type campaigns to keep adults aware of their options and the necessity.

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SKILLS FOR LIFE

21st Century Skills is an initiative led by the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) that brings together public and private sector stakeholders. The initiative strengthens learning ecosystems to equip Latin American and Caribbean citizens with transversal skills.

<https://clic-skills.iadb.org/en/skills21@iadb.org>