



2024 Public Sector Human Capital Trends, The Human Aspect in Technology

Introduction

Remember the joy of learning as a child? While formal classrooms played a role, much of early education happened through play, exploration, and informal interactions with classmates and friends. Applying this same approach to learning new technologies in the workplace can yield significant benefits. Public sector organizations are currently grappling with how to adopt emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). While some organizations may opt for traditional training methods to identify the best way to adopt these new technologies, those most effective in making the transition have started by creating intentional time and space for workers to experiment and play on their own time, allowing them to determine the best use cases in their daily work. As children, learning in spaces beyond the classroom such as the playground encouraged creativity and nurtured imagination, and these same principles can apply in our workforces today to learn and embrace new technologies.

Playing with Technology: A New Approach to Workforce Development

AI is rapidly permeating into our everyday experiences such as customer service, web searches, traveling with GPS, and choosing a movie to watch. Tools like AI-powered chatbots, recommendation algorithms, and data analytics platforms are generally intuitive but do require practice to leverage the full benefits. The basic mechanics of these tools can be learned at a basic level through more traditional learning methods such as PowerPoint presentations or user guides. However, a more hands-on, "Just Play with It", experiential approach that is worker driven, rather than leadership driven, allows employees to discover the capabilities most applicable to their day-to-day work.

Enter the Digital Playground: a virtual space where teams can safely try out new tools without fear of negative impacts on their work. Essentially, this means providing employees with access to these tools in a sandbox- a risk-free environment - so they can play with the new technology without impacting their day-to-day work. Learning through play can also ease workforce anxiety about new technologies by naturally fostering familiarity and comfort.



Public sector organizations risk missing out on the full benefits and potential of new technologies if they do not allocate time for employees to engage with them. It is critical for public sector organizations to create the time for workers to independently engage with these Digital Playgrounds so they can learn how to integrate new technologies into their daily tasks and deliver mission critical work more effectively and efficiently. Organizations can introduce Digital Playgrounds best through active participation without an intended goal; providing exposure to the new tools without a specific goal lets employees use the tools how they best see fit for their experience. This way, individuals will intuitively test solutions to their own processes without the organization having to commit resources to a pilot before necessary troubleshooting and user feedback.

As new technology continues to evolve, it will be passively integrated into workplace tools and enhance productivity without requiring active engagement or technical expertise from employees, however the skill development with these tools should be an intentional exercise. This active engagement with new technology promotes development of a variety of additional skills. Upskilling in this way provides individuals with more growth potential and subsequently more career mobility. Continuous professional development fosters long-term employee commitment and is vital to public sector organizations who want to better deliver on their mission goals and create an environment where top talent will choose to go and remain.

NSA's Virtual Reality Mission

The National Security Agency (NSA) is becoming a leader in developing innovative learning solutions in the form of Digital Playgrounds. DISCOVER NSA has shifted from traditional onboarding to conducting mission-simulating team activities using Virtual Reality (VR). For newcomers, immersive video tours and games are captivating alternatives that are proving to be more engaging than outdated learning methods to inspire and prepare NSA's workforce for mission.





Beyond the Technology: Developing Human Capabilities

While technical knowledge has become more crucial with evolving tools and technologies, core human skills like mentoring, coaching, and collaboration remain the most vital for workers. This concept, known as the Imagination Deficit, suggests that as technology augments the technical aspects of work, the public sector will increasingly rely on innate human capabilities such as creativity, curiosity, empathy, and critical thinking to enhance and amplify efforts. As technology evolves and future enhancements take on the more repetitive tasks, the more connected work such as innovation and development of others are still best done by humans.

Revisiting experiential learning as children, a common lesson was to “work smarter, not harder” and adopting new technologies promises to reduce the need for mundane, technical, and repetitive tasks, freeing up time to focus on strengthening workers’ human capabilities. By reimagining how the public sector approaches routine tasks, teams can concentrate on more meaningful, human-centered work, thereby amplifying outputs and supporting the overall mission of the organization.

Consider the example of a communications team tasked with creating a campaign to promote a new initiative within the public sector. Traditionally, much of their time might be spent on repetitive tasks like data entry and basic analytics. Now, with AI tools handling these tasks, teams can have the time to be more imaginative with brainstorming creative concepts, more curious with exploring new channels and methods to reach different demographics, more in-tune with their audience in crafting messages that resonate on a personal level, and more analytical in measuring the potential impact of different strategies to optimize the campaign’s success.

The potential benefits of investing in developing human capabilities are clear: public sector organizations are better able to attract and retain top talent by emphasizing the most human elements of the workplace and not solely relying on technical skills as an indicator for their performance. Organizations showing empathy and transparency garner trust from employees and encourage a safe environment to tackle new challenges in the workplace. To address the imagination deficit, public sector organizations should provide trainings that strengthen their workforce's human capabilities and implement procedures, not only throughout the Talent Acquisition process, but throughout the full employee lifecycle from recruitment, to training and career progression, and finally leadership development.



These screening methods can be woven into current recruitment and hiring practices as public sector organizations look to be less focused on paperwork and allocate more emphasis to creating programs that incentivize top talent to work at a public sector organization. To accomplish this, organizations need to intentionally create an environment that attracts eager learners who can adapt to various challenges. Fostering such an environment should not be solely focused on new recruits; it begins with cultivating the current culture and creating an atmosphere focused on growth.

In recent years, the Department of Commerce has prioritized the cultivation of soft skills and human capabilities to both deliver better on their mission as well as attract and retain top talent. Jessica Palatka, Director of Human Resource Management and Chief Human Capital Officer, believes that one effective way to cultivate soft skills and human capabilities is through one-on-one mentoring and coaching. With support from these relationships, employees can focus on their unique improvement areas and develop an actionable plan to strengthen those skills.

Mentoring in and of itself is a human skill to be cultivated and emphasizes the importance of building soft skills through experiential learning in

interpersonal contexts; these opportunities allow employees to enhance their communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and emotional intelligence in real-world settings. Positive mentorship promotes workplace cultures that value feedback and assess employees not just on technical skills, but also on the human aspects that might be overlooked when focusing solely on mission goals. In today's tech-driven workplaces, public sector organizations can intentionally cultivate and nurture interpersonal connections to promote the development of human capabilities.

DOC's Invaluable Leadership

The Department of Commerce is empowering workers to lead by cultivating skills critical to adapt and learn in the face of change. Using leadership development cohorts and mentoring programs the Department is targeting specific skills related to business acumen and empathetic people management.



Bringing It All Together

Learning has never been exclusive to formal methods. Organizations that welcome play as a valuable tool for workforce development will benefit from an engaged, tech-savvy workforce that is better equipped to channel their human capabilities to drive improved mission outcomes. Digital Playgrounds can provide a safe space for employees to freely explore and build comfort with new technologies. As employees adapt to these technologies, their time can gradually shift away from transactional tasks towards high-value work and developing the essential human capabilities required to drive the organization forward; the outcome of the Imagination Deficit problem will be that human traits emerged as what drives success in the workplace. This evolution requires a strategic investment in training programs and the establishment of new talent acquisition mechanisms to identify and measure these skills effectively. This approach allows public sector organizations to develop a workforce that is adept at utilizing new technologies while also excelling in roles that demand human insight and creativity.

For more information about how Deloitte can help your organization take on the trends, please contact:

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