

Skills Playbook Series
Chapter 1

Getting started with skills use cases



What's inside

- 3** Introduction
- 4** Skills — the what and why
- 7** How to get started with skills
- 12** Skills Use Case Framework
- 17** Example in practice
- 20** Best practices

Introduction

The ability to track, manage, and develop employee skills is an incredibly powerful enabler of business and people strategy.

[Cornerstone's Talent Health Index](#) research shows high-performing organizations leverage skills-based talent strategies about 2x the average rate. Yet, when it comes to guidance on how to actually implement a skills strategy or even just get started, much of the discussion can be overly theoretical, describing a vision without any practical advice on how to get there, or overly technical, getting lost in terminology, taxonomy and technology. Cornerstone knows that HR and business leaders need more — how to practically identify, develop, and deploy their workforce's skills to drive outcomes — engagement, development and business performance.

The Cornerstone Skills Playbook Series aims to help you do just that, implement a skills-based approach to your people processes in a way that's tangible, practical, and results-driven. We will give real-world insights to different use cases, step-by-step guidance, and share best practices and common pitfalls.

One of the reasons for skills confusion is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to skills strategy. Ultimately, that's a good thing. Skilling can unlock value for organizations with various business needs, use cases, maturity levels and tech ecosystems across multiple industries, organization sizes and contexts. This is important to keep in mind when approaching the playbooks. While we have confidence that the guidance can work across different types of organizations and maturity levels, there is of course not one universal or singularly comprehensive way that a skills strategy can be implemented. We therefore aim to be instructive and give guidance but encourage you to adapt or even disagree as is relevant for your unique context.

Impact of a skills-based strategy on employees²

High-performing organizations leverage skills-based strategies ~2x the average rate¹

2x

Motivation increase when employees have skills aligned with their employer's needs

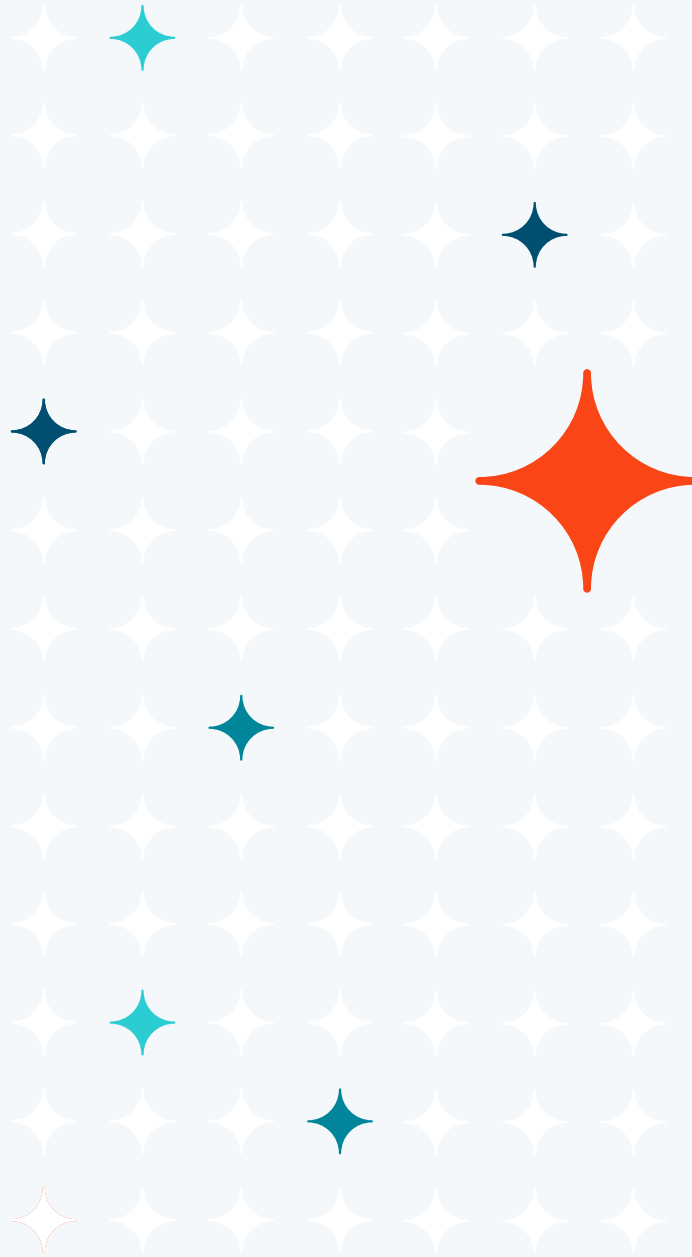
2.5x

Increased ability to adapt to changes at work when employees have adequate training resources

2x

Increase in employees' happiness and retention in organizations that promote skill development

1. Cornerstone People Research Lab. "2023 Talent Health Index: Your holistic guide to talent success", 2023, p.25, Cornerstone Ondemand, csod.com
2. Lighthouse Research, 2024



Skills — the what and why

Skills:

What are they?

Why are they important?

Skills are the specific abilities and techniques required to perform a given task well. Skills are the ‘What’ that allow employees to apply their knowledge (the ‘context’) and demonstrate competencies (the ‘how’) in their roles.

Skills are transferable, equitable, specific, actionable, and developable which make them a critical enabler in identifying, developing, and deploying talent.

- ✦ **Transferable:** Skills can be applied across various roles and industries
- ✦ **Equitable:** Accessible to everyone, allowing for equal opportunities for development and career advancement
- ✦ **Specific and Actionable:** Result in concrete, measurable actions and outcomes
- ✦ **Developable:** Can be developed and improved through practice and training



With the rapid pace of change across technology and the workforce, skills have become increasingly important in delivering business outcomes and people engagement. You can learn more about this in our [2024 State of the Skills Economy report](#).

In defining what skills are, it is therefore also important to recognize what they aren't. Firstly, skills are not an outcome in it of themselves. People with the right skills deliver business outcomes. Skills are simply the enabler. Do not lose sight of either the people or the business outcomes. Secondly, skills are not everything. We strongly believe in skills as a key component in delivering workforce agility and business outcomes. However, knowledge and competencies, for example, are still important.

Skills are the **‘what’** that allow employees to apply their knowledge (the **‘context’**) and demonstrate competencies (the **‘how’**) in their roles

Knowledge

‘context’

Theoretical or practical understanding of a subject, providing the context for action.

Healthcare Regulations, Labor Market Trends, GDPR , Consumer Behavior

Skills

‘what’

The specific abilities and techniques required to perform a given task well.

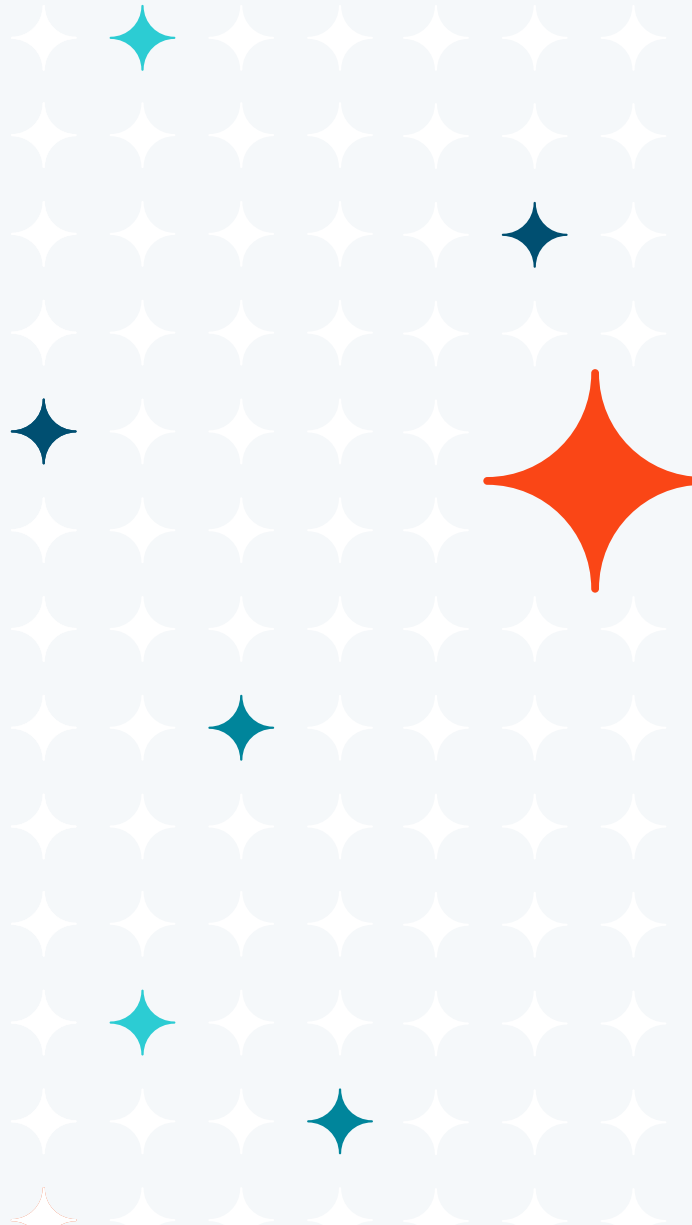
Data Analysis, Coding, Public Speaking, Copywriting

Competencies

‘how’

The behaviors and attitudes required to successfully perform in a role or organization.

Integrity, Initiative, Empathy, Creativity, Collaboration



How to get started with skills

How to get started:

1

Answer the “why”: Start with your business problem

Research

What issue is currently affecting revenue initiatives in your business?

- Slow uptake of new technologies
- Lagging sales efficiency
- Low employee engagement
- High turnover
- Poor customer experience
- Compliance issues

2

Identify what support your workforce needs

Understand

How can our people strategy help address the business problem?

Prioritize

What focus area will best help address the problem?

3

Prioritize skills use case(s) that will help power your people strategy

Focus

Start with the skills use case(s) that most directly supports your business objective and that fits your readiness.

1

Answer the ‘why’ first

[57% of HR leaders say skills shortages undermine performance](#), which will only grow with labor market shifts and new technology.¹ By 2030, 75M US baby boomers will be at retirement age and 85% of jobs that will exist haven’t been invented yet.^{2,3} These are good reasons why skills are a focus across the HR industry. Yet, you need to create more specificity for your organization’s why. For example:

- Does your energy company need to build and recruit new green engineering skills?
- Does your life sciences organization need new ways to engage with healthcare professionals with the rise of telemedicine?
- Do you need to redeploy people to new customer success roles as call centers become automated by AI?

Focusing on which business problem you are trying to solve is ultra-critical for an effective skilling strategy. It helps you define success criteria, measure value, and prioritize your skills efforts. Organizations that are successful with skills-based strategies don’t start with a broad ambition to become ‘skills-based.’ They are laser-focused on how addressing their organization’s and employees’ skill needs can help solve a specific business challenge.

If you are not anchored to a top business priority, it will create challenges down the line for adoption and measuring value. Leaders and employees alike need to see the real-world benefit of investing in skills development. What are the top 3 things your leadership team is discussing at business reviews? – be a part of that conversation.

1. Lighthouse Research and Cornerstone. “The Workforce Readiness Gap”, 2024, [csod.com](#)
 2. United States Census Bureau. “By 2030, All Baby Boomers Will Be Age 65 or Older”, 2019, [census.gov](#)
 3. Dell Technologies. “Realizing 2030: A Divided Vision of the Future”, [delltechnologies.com](#)

How to start

Stakeholder interviews

Conduct interviews with your leadership, department heads, and key stakeholders to gather insights on current business challenges and strategic goals

Questions to ask:

- What are the primary challenges impacting our company and overall growth?
- What are your short-term and long-term strategic goals?
- What are the top risks to these goals?
- What is the organization measuring and where might it be lagging?
- What are the focus areas for innovation, research, and development?

Data Analysis

Review internal data (e.g., performance metrics, employee surveys, turnover rates) to identify trends and areas of concern

2

Identify what support your workforce needs

Once you've identified your business 'why', it's important then to understand the people component. What support does your workforce need to address the business issue or need? This will help you identify where you can focus leveraging skills to improve outcomes. To help you get started, here are some examples of common business challenges, leading indicators of those challenges, and various questions you can consider to identify what areas of your people strategy may help.

for example

Indicators

Considerations

Business Performance

- › Organizational goals or priorities are not well-defined
- › Revenue and profit targets are missed
- › Operational projects are delayed or go over budget and deadlines

- › Do you need to develop new skills?
- › Do you need to develop leadership?
- › Do you need new talent in key roles through recruiting or internal mobility?

High Turnover

- › Turnover is higher than industry standards
- › Turnover is higher in the first 12 months of service
- › Engagement scores are low

- › Do you need to improve on-boarding?
- › Do you need to improve development and performance management?
- › Do you need visible career pathways?

Compliance

- › High number of legal claims
- › Incomplete data for audits and regulatory bodies
- › Security breaches

- › Do you have critical skills gaps?
- › Do you have the right talent in key roles?
- › Do you have compliance minded leadership?

Innovation

- › Declining market share as a result of new competitors / products
- › Struggling to enter new geographic or demographic market segments
- › Reliant on old or outdated technology

- › Have you identified emerging skills?
- › Have you benchmarked critical skills against your industry and competition?
- › Have you analyzed these skills in your workforce?

3

Prioritize skills use cases

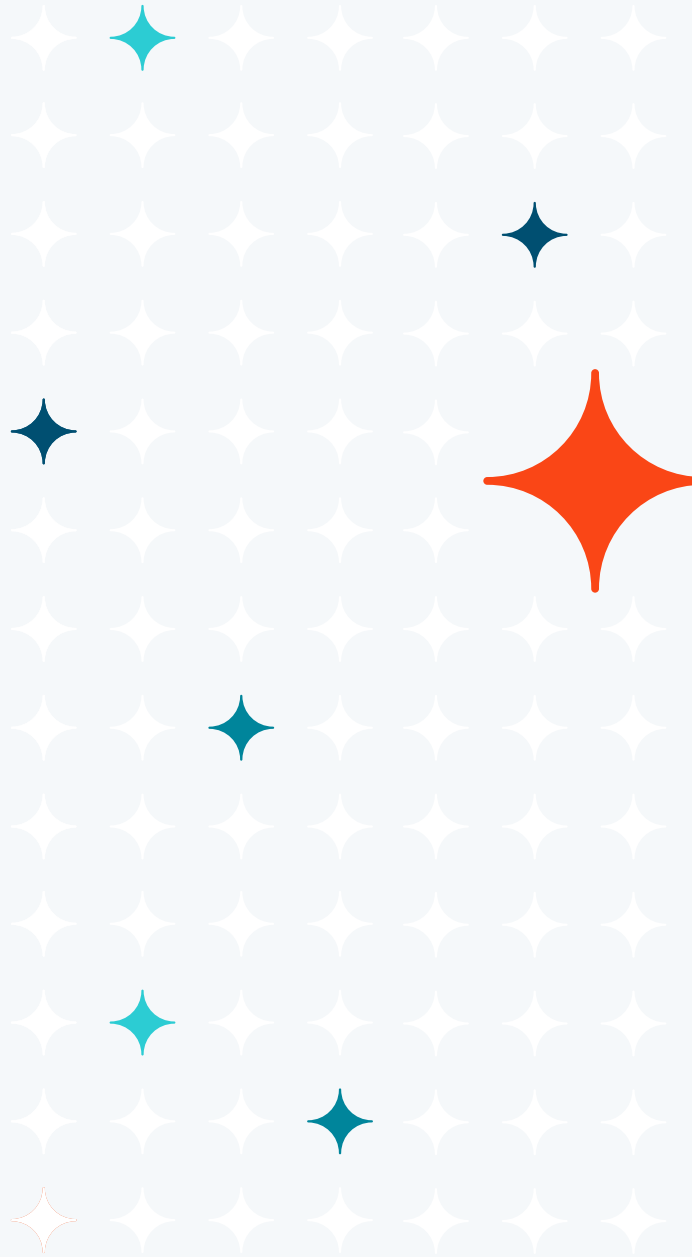
The power of skills is that they can be leveraged to improve the effectiveness of people development processes across the range of the employee lifecycle. Many organizations, leaders, and practitioners alike get overwhelmed tackling skills because they think they must have every question answered, every process re-designed, and all technology integrated to become skills based.

To start, we recommend identifying the skills use case that best supports your business. As skills become embedded as the new way of working, you can continue expanding your use cases. If you've already taken the time to understand your business why and how your people strategy can help, then it becomes much easier to prioritize your top skills use cases.

To help organizations think through the various skills use cases, Cornerstone has developed a Skills Use Case Framework, which highlights and organizes some of the most common skills use cases, how they connect together, and how you can layer use cases as you mature in your skills journey. While not exhaustive of all potential use cases, the framework aims to help you think through and prioritize your skills use cases.

A skills use case approach enables organizations to:

- ✦ Prioritize efforts to drive business outcomes
- ✦ Implement skills processes step-wise
- ✦ Define a reasonable scope of work
- ✦ Deliver earlier value
- ✦ Create a foundation for the next use case
- ✦ Bring people along the journey



Skills Use Case Framework

Skills Use Case Framework overview



Define skills that we need

These use cases help define what skills an organization needs for their business strategy, based on labor market trends, and for each role in their organization.



Identify the skills that I have and want

These use cases help identify the skills an individual has or wants to develop based on their personalized career interests and development goals.



Develop skills to address gaps

These use cases help develop skills through formal, social, and on the job learning experiences.



Validate skills acquisition and proficiency

These use cases help to assess an individual's skills acquisition and proficiency.



Deploy skills into areas of business need

These use cases match skill needs for various roles and projects with individuals who have the necessary skills proficiency.



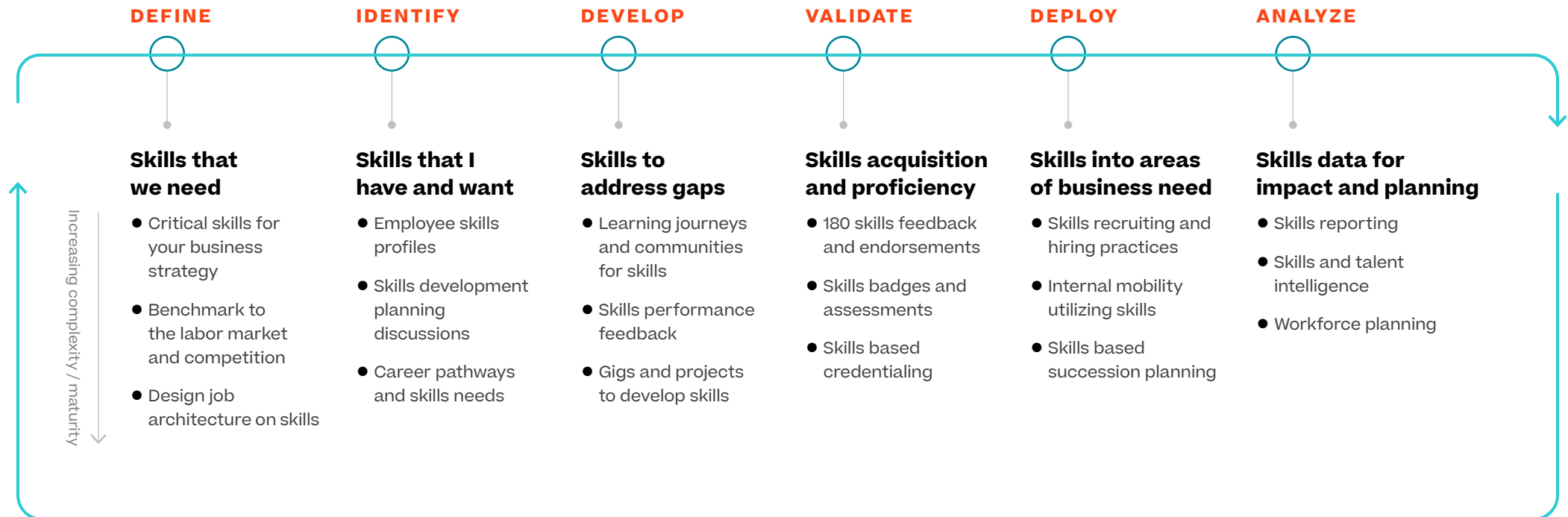
Analyze skills data for impact and planning

These use cases provide an overview of the skills your organization has and needs to support strategic talent decisions and workforce planning.

Skills Use Case Framework

The Skills Use Case Framework is divided into 6 stages across the HR lifecycle. While this structure is helpful to organize and visualize, it is not intended to show skills use cases as a strictly linear process.

Similarly, while generally we recommend starting with the top use cases and working down as you gain maturity due to effort and complexity, this will depend greatly on your organization's current state and priorities. Start with the skills use case(s) that most directly supports your business objective and that fits your readiness, regardless of where that use case sits in the framework.





Start simple in scope, scale, and complexity

While it's likely that most organizations would be eager to do it all, it's not recommended to try to do it all at once. Even if you could 'implement' everything at once, it's unlikely your organization and people could. Start simple in scope, scale, and complexity.

While you may aim to, for example, have skills requirements defined for every role in the organization and robust skills-based learning journeys created for each one, that may not be the best place to start. Instead, it may be more manageable to identify a handful of business-critical skills for a single function you can curate learning for.

Embedding skills one step at a time to improve your people processes is much more manageable and realistic. You can absolutely deliver business value at elementary levels of skills use. A step-by-step approach allows you to define a reasonable scope of work, deliver value earlier, and, most critically, bring your organization with you on the journey.

Even for organizations who aim for the 'Skills Ferrari,' remember to teach your managers and employees 'to drive' along the way. You can help them understand and adopt skills development at earlier, more straightforward stages while you [build toward a more complex and mature state](#).

We recommend identifying a priority skilling use case to focus on that best supports your business. As skills become embedded as the new way of working, you can continue expanding your use cases. By first understanding your business 'why' and how your people strategy can best support, this should make prioritizing your skills use case relatively straight-forward and ensure your work on skills stays grounded in the right things.

Keep in Mind

- Skills use cases are not meant to be isolated, strictly linear, or exhaustive
- However, identifying a priority skills use case will help you focus your efforts
- Using your priority use case as the center, identify the other supporting skills use cases
- Different use cases require a different level of maturity and effort. Start small and expand.
- Even if you could 'implement' everything at once, your people can't

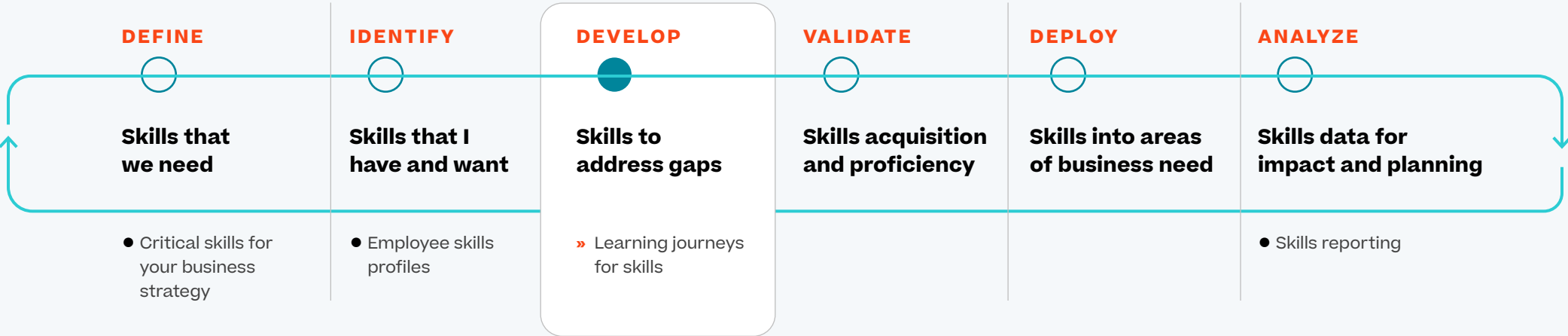
No skills use case is done in isolation

While we strongly recommend focusing in on a priority skills use case, we acknowledge that skills use cases do not work in isolation. It's not possible to create effective upskilling learning journeys without defining business critical skills or facilitate skills-based hiring and mobility without skills profiles. And it's very unlikely that you will do any work on skills without having at least some basic reporting involved. In fact, part of the value of skills is that they create a red thread across your people processes.

Therefore, the approach that works best is to first identify your priority skills use case, and then use that use case as the foundation to identify which other skills use cases you may need as enablers.

Doing this should focus your efforts towards your priority skills use case and avoid scope creep in your enabler use cases by being grounded in what outcome they are helping deliver. Let's look at a hypothetical example to see what this would look like in practice.

Example





Example in practice

Example

1

the ‘why’

business problem

Sales success rate is down due to changing ways of working

Our sales teams have historically been dependent on in person sales calls. Due to the increase in remote work and less in person opportunities, our sales success rate is down. Our sales strategies and people must increasingly rely on digital engagement.

2

Identify

workforce needs

Build new digital engagement and selling skills

To deliver sales through digital engagement, we need to develop our people to employ these new strategies. This requires developing our teams through learning and coaching.

3

Prioritize

skills use cases

Need to develop critical digital engagement & selling skills

Priority skills use case

Develop digital engagement and selling skills to support our new sales strategy. To start simple in scope, scale, and complexity, we will focus on creating learning journeys for these skills.

Enabler use cases to support

- We will identify with leadership 3-5 critical skills we want to develop across all of sales.
- We will further embed these skills as a part of development discussions.
- We will start capturing and reporting on this skills data through skills profiles.

Delivering value

One of the biggest advantages of a use case approach is delivering earlier value. Many organizations attempt to tackle too much at once which slows down delivery and can disconnect value outcomes.

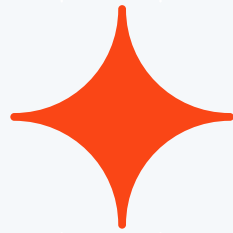
Outcomes of example skills use case

- Identified the top skills to support the business strategy
- Communicated these skills priorities and the business context
- Had development conversations to personalize skill needs
- Began to capture broader skill have / wants from employees
- Created targeted learning directly aligned to strategy through skills
- Simplified learner experience in finding the right learning
- Began to report broader skills trends and data of our function
- Identified trends for future learning and development priorities

What wasn't required to start

- Create a custom taxonomy
- Design a new skills-based role architecture
- Define and explain a proficiency scale
- Deploy skills to the entire organization
- Create learning pathways for every possible role or skill
- Embed skills within every use case

While these items may be on your skills roadmap, they aren't required to drive early value for skills.



Best practices

It's still all about **change and engagement**

Getting lost in intellectual and technical discussions regarding skills strategies is easy, particularly for HR and IT teams. How are skills different than competencies? Should we choose an external taxonomy or create one? How do we define proficiencies? How do we ensure skills are integrated across all our systems? These questions are undoubtedly important, and answers to these will be required at different points along your skills journey.

However, too many organizations get overly focused on these questions at the expense of more important ones, such as:

- How do we get leaders to champion skills development?
- How do we help managers embed skills in development conversations?
- What does it take to really develop new skills?
- How do we get hiring managers to prioritize skills when identifying candidates?

Be careful not to spend more time in academic or technical debates than focusing on how to drive change, adoption, and value. Always keep in mind what really matters to employees and your business.

Engage leaders on business problems

Don't lead with tech or even skills, identify their business challenges and recognize the skills use cases.

Involve employees in needs analysis

Listen to employee lifecycle pain points and crowdsource skill needs. Communicate the journey.

Articulate the why

Create a clear purpose and direction, ensuring that employees understand how skills will help them meet business objectives.

Keep it simple

Don't try to deploy too much at once (use case approach). Accept imperfect in favor of simplicity.

Prioritize first-line managers

Putting skills into practice works when managers feel equipped and are on-board with the why and how.

Be honest about the WIIFM

What's in it for employees? How do skills help them be successful in their career?

Don't overlook HR

Skills require new ways of working within your HR teams. Make sure they are supported in the journey.

Data and stories

Define desired outcomes up front and track the data, but don't overlook the power of individual stories also.

Progress not perfection

Communicate what's working and what's not. Review and adjust your strategy based on the feedback & insights you get – progress not perfection!

Get started!

Learn along the way

While it's natural to want a comprehensive and flawless plan, waiting for the perfect strategy or answers to every question can lead to missed opportunities and stall out. Even the most mature organizations, well on their way in their skills journey, will tell you they are still figuring things out. That's ok! Pilot small-scale initiatives, gather feedback, and iterate.

Remember, the goal is to create momentum and foster a culture of continuous learning and growth rather than striving for an unattainable ideal from the outset. By starting with a clear focus and embracing ambiguity, you can build a robust skills strategy that evolves and strengthens over time, better aligning with business needs and employee expectations.

Start small

Start with one team, department or function to pilot your strategy. This will help manage any complexity and allow for quick adjustments.

Focus on critical skills

Focus on the essential skills needed to address your organization's key pain points. The goal is to address immediate needs effectively, not to address everything at once.

Put skills to work

A skills strategy and skills technology alone won't create outcomes. Spend more time on helping leaders and employees leverage skills than talking about it.

Pilot, gather feedback, and iterate

It's both continuous improvement and a new way of working which requires change management and culture.

The Skills Playbook Series

A comprehensive guide designed to help you implement the skills use cases aligned to your business needs and people strategy.

This multi-chapter series offers step-by-step guidance across the different use cases within the Skills Use Case Framework. Each part will focus on a different section of the framework as a set of priority use cases, including develop, deploy, validate, and analyze. As we focus on these use cases, we will also incorporate guidance around enabling use cases needed as well.

By providing actionable insights and practical steps, the Skills Playbook Series equips HR departments with the knowledge to enhance their talent management processes, thereby driving organizational success and workforce agility.

Chapter 1 | How to get started with Skills Use Cases

This introduction chapter covers what skills are, how to get started with skills, and introduces the skills framework and a use case approach to skills.

Chapter 2 | Defining Skills

This chapter outlines how to define business critical skills for your organization, including leveraging labor market intelligence and application to your role architecture.

Chapter 3 | Identifying Skills

This chapter outlines practical techniques for identifying your employees' skills needs and wants and engaging in meaningful career development conversations leveraging skills.

Chapter 4 | Developing Skills

This chapter dives into methodologies for developing skills through a combination of self-paced, social, and on the job learning approaches. It details ways to foster a culture of continuous learning and growth, ensuring employees develop both human and technical skills pertinent to their roles.

Chapter 5 | Validating Skills

Here, the playbook explores different methods for assessing and validating employee skills. It includes best practices for conducting assessments, certification programs, and peer reviews, ensuring that skills are accurately validated and recognized within the organization.

Chapter 6 | Deploying Skills

This chapter focuses on how to allocate the right people with the right skills to the right roles and tasks. It covers skills- based hiring, internal mobility, and succession planning.

Chapter 7 | Analyzing Skills

This chapter highlights the importance of data and analytics in understanding skill gaps, trends, and future skill needs. It outlines tools and techniques for collecting and analyzing skill data, enabling HR professionals to conduct strategic workforce planning.

Cornerstone Galaxy, the complete AI-powered workforce agility platform, allows organizations to identify skills gaps and development opportunities, retain and engage top talent, and provide multimodal learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of the modern workforce.

Schedule a Demo