

# Skill-building strategies: How to grow professionally

Whether interested in going on the job market, advancing at a current company, or simply growing as a professional, savvy workers realize the importance of continuously expanding their skillset. In today's ever-changing workplaces, commitment to lifelong learning shows a willingness to evolve with the times and stay relevant.

Building skills, however, should not be a random effort to pile more onto a resume. The most effective results stem from thoughtful consideration of weaknesses, skill gaps, and career aspirations.

Unsure where to target your efforts? A few ways to identify skills that might benefit your repertoire include:

## **Reading job descriptions**

Even if you aren't looking to change jobs, it pays to know the qualities currently in demand for your industry. What hard and soft skills do employers advertise for when seeking applicants for positions similar to yours *and* for roles at the next higher level? How do you compare?

## **Scrutinizing performance reviews**

Go back through documents to identify areas in which improvement could be made. In addition to looking for places in which you did not receive the highest score, read notes at the end. Managers oftentimes provide suggestions on skills an employee can acquire to become more valuable to the organization.

## **Seeking input**

Gather feedback from trusted people who know you well. Mentors, managers, and members of your network can pinpoint soft skills that could use a boost as well as hard skills worth acquiring.

## **Methods of obtaining new skills**

Once you've zeroed in on some possible areas for improvement, think about potential actions. Time commitment will undoubtedly play a role in decisions, such as what's involved in attending a one-day seminar vs. going back to school.

Likewise, cost influences professional development choices. Some businesses reimburse fully or partially if the knowledge obtained benefits the organization, so it pays to inquire. Also, look at the return on investment. You might jump automatically to a higher bracket on your company's pay scale with certain educational achievements.

The number of delivery options available nowadays makes finding something that matches your needs and budget easier than ever.

Popular ways to learn new things include:

### **On-site education**

Finishing up an undergraduate degree or pursuing a graduate one can open up doors as well as boost confidence. Some jobs require or highly prefer candidates with certain degrees. If your dream role demands one, heading back to school makes sense.

Would brushing up on accounting procedures or learning more about cybersecurity make you better at your job? People who enjoy in-person learning often opt to take specific classes or seminars rather than enroll in a degree program. Check community colleges, libraries, and professional organizations for offerings.

### **Online education**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many great institutions of higher learning offered degree programs and classes online. Such possibilities skyrocketed over the past year, giving prospective students greater choice and flexibility.

In addition to virtual classes conducted by traditional brick-and-mortar colleges, a wealth of respectable online educational platforms exist. Coursera, edX, Skillshare, Udacity, Udemy, and LinkedIn Learning rank among the most popular. Some even offer free classes.

### **Certification programs**

In numerous industries, certification demonstrates competence and commitment. Requirements vary but oftentimes include passing an extensive exam. Workers interested in taking such a test typically enroll in an online or on-site preparation program or set up an independent study plan.

Before embarking, determine the certifications respected in your industry and most likely to advance your career. In human resources, for instance, employers tend to view [SHRM and HRCI certifications](#) as the gold standard.

### **Company-related opportunities**

Is your organization looking for someone to attend a conference or take a vendor-offered class? Jump at the chance. You'll gain skills the business deems useful and do so on its dime.

Some employers encourage worker participation in their industry's professional association(s) by paying the membership dues. Take advantage! You'll gain access to a variety of exclusive professional development opportunities.

Also, look within the workplace itself for learning experiences. Job shadow someone in a different department to become better versed about what goes on at the company as a whole. Join a mentorship program to connect with someone who can offer career guidance (or, if you're at an advanced career stage, provide direction to an up-and-coming employee). Join an [ERG](#) (Employee Resource Group) to broaden horizons regarding diversity and inclusion.

### **Volunteer work**

Supporting a cause enhances development through hands-on experience. Projects often employ critical soft skills such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and organization. And people helping others often help themselves in the process. Not only does volunteering expand one's network, research shows hiring managers favor candidates with [volunteer experience](#) on their resumes.

## Independent study

Lastly, professionals can hone a variety of skills by taking matters into their own hands. Scout out books and podcasts on subjects of interest; you're bound to find plenty of experts with great advice and fresh perspectives. Browse available [TED Talks](#) for ones relevant to your career development needs. Use the site's TED Recommends feature to help identify speeches that particularly suit your objectives. What you ultimately get out of self-directed learning depends on the effort you put in, so regularly carve out time to broaden your horizons!