

Hiring

Identify — and Hire — Lifelong Learners

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Summary. The most pertinent question one can ask of a current or future employee may just be: How do you learn? Lifelong learning is now roundly considered to be an economic imperative, and job candidates or employees who consider, update, and improve their skills will be... [**more**](#)

Talent management has undergone a massive overhaul, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Working environments, business priorities, and new technologies have been adopted with prodigious urgency. Hiring and onboarding have become substantially remote activities. In January 2020 — before Covid had even become a pandemic — the World Economic Forum called for a global reskilling revolution, and firms now require different skills of their workforces, including resilience, adaptability, digital, design, and interpersonal skills.

These changes have been a challenge for job candidates and employers alike. But I believe that there's a simple way to bring some much-needed clarity and guidance — one which adds value all the way along the employee lifecycle, from hiring to managing performance.

The secret is to ask of people a simple question: *How do you learn?*

This is not about simplistic learning preferences (such as schedules and modalities) or broadly discredited learning styles (such as being a visual or aural learner). This is about an individual's personal system for updating, improving, and sharing her knowledge and skills. Does the job candidate you're considering have such a system? And, for that matter, do you?

This may be the most pertinent question one can ask of a current or future employee. Future performance of the individual is just as much a function of high-caliber, systematic, intentional skills development as it is of past achievements and qualifications, the traditional fare of job interviews. And the capability and much of the value of a company is, in turn, a function of the collective skills of its workforce.

Lifelong learning is now roundly considered to be an economic imperative and “the only sustainable competitive advantage.” Job candidates and employees who consider, update, and improve their skills are the high performers, especially over the longer term. Pressing ourselves on the question of how we learn brings a hard, pragmatic edge to the important but nebulous notion of growth mindset.

Let’s consider the question’s application to two key stages of the employee lifecycle: hiring and performance management.

Hiring and getting hired

Suppose the question were asked by default during the screening process. Convincing answers would indicate high levels of curiosity, organization, and method.

As a hiring manager:

- **Take care to be inclusive and open-minded about what counts as learning.** This is partly to be able to appreciate cultural and personal differences. It’s also to recognize that there is a dizzying proliferation of content from which one can learn: courses, books, people, poems, performance support tools, songs, films, conversations, observations, reflections, memories, and more. How does the candidate go about making sense of all of this? How does she face up to content overload? How does she select what’s most relevant and then slice, dice, and digest it in a way that improves her feeling of fulfillment and level of performance over the long term?
- **Ask the candidate about something they’ve recently learned** and how they could apply it in the role for which you are considering them.
- **Be prepared to have the same question be asked of you.** Show

an awareness of the skills deemed to be of particularly high value at the firm — this is typically a list of 20 to 100 skills, behaviors, and values, defined with care.

As a candidate:

- **Ask about the learning culture and facilities for learning at the firm.** This will help understand more about the environment you may be walking into, and will help demonstrate your interest in learning to your prospective employer.
- **Don't wait to be asked about how you learn.** Volunteer your convincing answer at the right moment in the conversation.
- **Be prepared to answer any and all of the above questions for hiring managers.**

Performance management

The question “How do you learn?” can also reap rewards in the appraisal process. As well as assessing and rewarding past performance, a properly conducted appraisal will identify skills gaps to close and strengths to reinforce. And the progressive employer will have curated the right learning content to achieve this for their workforce, along with intelligent technologies to distribute the right learning to the right learner. They may also incorporate the question into performance management software, so it is fully embedded for everyone. The question usefully tees up the conversation for the next appraisal: So what *did* you learn?

A corollary of all this is that individuals should themselves ensure they have such a system in place to reliably and consistently develop their skills and thinking. Even within a progressive and innovative corporate culture, responsibility for learning ultimately lies with the learner.

For this we all, as individuals, need to develop and carry around with us more of a curiosity about skills. Which are the skills of one's best self? Which of those are the real differentiating strengths which are not only important in your current role, but to your entire career? Where do the gaps lie? How do we make abstract concepts such as communication, leadership, and resilience more concrete? How should we quantify and calibrate and talk about our skills?

Skills are the *lingua franca* of talent management and run through all the important documents of the employee lifecycle — from resumés to job descriptions to learning content to appraisals. We need to develop more of a *skills intelligence*, as individuals and as organizations.

There are many practices that may help the learner, including but not limited to:

- **Developing positive learning habits.** A habit starts out as an activity. Choose activities which suits your personality, lifestyle, and working pattern so that they are more likely to develop into enduring habits. This could be anything from reading an article each morning, to a timeboxed hour of learning per week, to reading a book a month or taking 15 minutes for reflective journaling in the evening.
- **Improving performance through deliberate practice.** Deconstruct the skill you're trying to develop, and take proactive and specific measures to improve each component part. This practice stands in contrast to just repeating performance in the same way each time.
- **Maintaining a “learned” and “to-learn” list,** which stays with you throughout your career, not just during your tenure at your current employer. This can be a simple spreadsheet or a Google doc. What's important is that it covers what you learned, where

and when you learned it, and ideally how you've applied it (written retrospectively). The list should enable you to answer an otherwise onerous question like: What were you learning six months ago?

- **Utilizing a 2×2 matrix approach to help you choose the right skills to focus on now.** Few of us have much time to learn, so we should prioritize our endeavors by considering evaluating the benefits of applying a new skill against the cost of acquiring it.

The world and the workplace have changed. The skills we need to function and flourish have correspondingly changed, and so we need to bring them into a smarter, sharper focus to know what they are and to seek them out proactively, persistently, and methodically. One way of doing that is by asking ourselves and others: How do you learn?

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