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INSIDER SESSIONS

What two viral skills experts want leaders to know about successful transformations

When it comes to skills transformations, plenty of companies are talking the talk—but very few are actually walking the walk, as Sandra Loughlin and Gareth Flynn have seen firsthand.

As founder and CEO of TQSolutions, Gareth has done ample research and partnered with many organizations along their skills journeys. Meanwhile, Sandra has had a front-row seat to one of the earliest—and most comprehensive—skills transformations while serving as EPAM's Chief Learning Scientist.

We were lucky enough to sit down with these two skills experts during a very special bonus episode of Gloat Insider Sessions—and the best practices they shared were too good to miss. So we've recapped their actionable advice and unique skills transformation perspectives so that you'll have the insights needed to kick your own skills agenda into overdrive.

#1. Root your skills strategy in the business problems you're trying to solve

While HR is often at the helm of successful skills initiatives, these transformations are so much more than an HR project, as Gareth explains. "For me, skills is not an HR thing. It's a business thing, so we have to hone in on the business problems we would like to solve and figure out how skills might be part of that solution set."

To get started, he suggests considering the organization-wide challenges that your business is trying to overcome and figuring out how skill needs and emerging knowledge gaps are impacting them. "I think we've got to unpack those problems, we've got to validate them, we've got to quantify them, we've got to prioritize them, and we've got to really then try to understand what will skills do? And what will the impact of skills be on those problems?", he says.

#2. Get started first and finetune your strategy as you go

All too often, leaders are so concerned about getting everything right at the start of their skills transformation that they end up delaying the initiative entirely. Rather than getting caught up in all the details, Sandra encourages executives to adopt a bigger-picture mindset so they can get the ball rolling and continuously iterate as they go. "I

think it's unfortunate that there's so much focus on getting all the big pieces right. You know, trying to solve all aspects of your job architecture, trying to solve all of these big picture things because it's very slow and the data keeps moving, the skills that are required just keep changing," she explains.

Sandra recommends zooming in on a handful of smaller problems that your skills transformation can solve initially while keeping your overarching goals top of mind. "Find the right problems that are small enough but have that big picture mentality," she suggests. "Don't try to solve everyone's problems or build the foundation across the entire organization right away. That will allow you to move fast, get things done, and over time get to the entire foundation without having to wait for that."

#3. AI is the backbone for all successful skills initiatives

Many organizations are looking to upskill and reskill to prepare for AI—but few leaders understand the pivotal role AI plays in turning these skill-building strategies into realities at scale. According to Sandra, "Skills data doesn't work without technology and data architecture underneath it. Frankly, without AI, none of this will work."

However, while implementing new AI-powered technology is a step in the right direction, it's far from the only component of a successful skills transformation. "A lot of companies have focused their strategies on acquiring a new technology but not understanding the ecosystem components and being able to look at what's there now and understand data flows and really start to take an architectural building perspective to figure out where you have redundancies, where you have gaps, and being very strategic in understanding what to get next and fix and solve for and that I think is a big shame," Sandra notes.

#4. But successful transformations are about more than your digital infrastructure

Gareth is quick to agree with Sandra that while technology is a key piece of the puzzle, it's far from the only thing leaders need to think about. "I think for me, thinking at a systematic level, not a programmatic implementation level— this isn't a tech implementation—I think is a really healthy lens to have."

After partnering with many organizations along their transformation journey, Gareth has developed a phrase to help customers keep the core parts of their change journey in perspective. "We've been coining an expression with customers, if you're spending one dollar on technology, think about spending five dollars on change," he shares. Although this process can be complex, Gareth knows firsthand that these efforts will be rewarded. "It's really really challenging, but ultimately it is worth it. It has huge pay-offs."

#5. Bring together people and IT leaders to maximize your results

There's plenty of skills transformation guidance out there, but ultimately Sandra doesn't think there's a one-size-fits-all formula for success. "There's no one right way to do this. There are a bunch of right ways and there are definitely some wrong ways," she acknowledges.

Sandra believes bringing together your technological leaders and your people leaders is crucial for creating a skills strategy that is both AI-powered and employee-centric. "Being able to bootstrap that expertise and experience that your organization has on the IT side and on the business side as well, is going to help people leaders understand the task in front of them."

Maintaining this sense of unity will also be pivotal for overcoming some of the challenges that occur during any skills transformation, as Sandra explains. "Be able to keep the faith alive, so to speak, when you're not getting all of those wins immediately. Getting past POCs is one of the hardest things to do and your business will—if you can connect those dots—that will help them understand the longer-term play."

Have Sandra and Gareth's words of wisdom inspired you to start (or level up) your own skills journey? We're here to help! We've got plenty of experts who can show you how to use AI to transform your company into a skills-powered organization.

[Let's chat]