7 Burning Questions in Skills Management

VISUAL WORKFORCE

Contents

Introduction

At Visual Workforce, our vision is a world where decisions about human capital are grounded in data – not gut. We are committed to building a revolutionary SaaS product that allows organizations to automate the capture of critical skills and capabilities data, and provide business leaders with clear insight into their people through powerful visualizations.
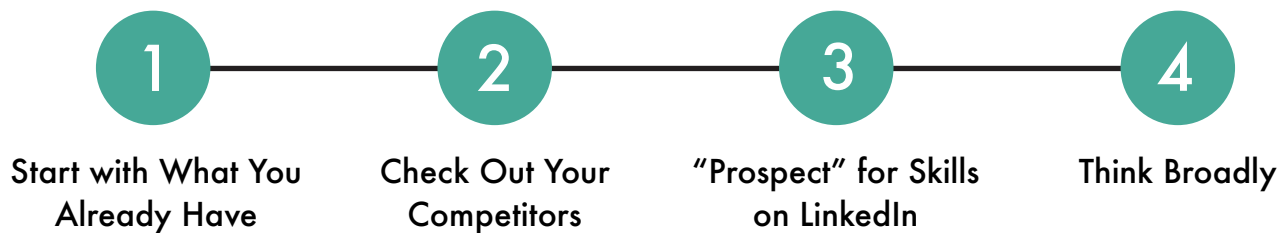
We believe that organizations that take a data-driven approach to managing their workforce will be the ones that thrive in this period of great change. In today's global economy, businesses need every edge they can get to stay competitive – they need to optimize every dollar, get more out of every employee, and build an organization that is truly resilient to change.

We have spent years working with business leaders, consultants, managers, and HR professionals; and, along the way, we have heard some of the same questions again and again. In this eBook, we pull back the curtain and talk through some of the most common, pressing questions that face anyone considering a skills management initiative. Whether you have been down this road before or are just getting started, this eBook will have helpful tips and tricks, best practices, and recommendations so you can make more informed human capital decisions and maximize the value of your greatest asset – your people.

01

How Do We Know What Skills We Should Be Tracking?

Identifying the skills you want to track is one of the most fundamental questions facing anyone embarking on a skills management initiative. However, it is also one of the most complex. Historically, many skills management initiatives did not even make it past this stage. Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet or fool proof system for identifying the right combination of skills and competencies for your organization. That being said, we have picked up some tricks that will get you well on your way.

1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Start with What You Already Have	Check Out Your Competitors	"Prospect" for Skills on LinkedIn	Think Broadly

1. Start with What You Already Have

Some organizations have already started down the path to skills management by systematically thinking through the different capabilities they need or want within their organization. If your organization has already laid this groundwork, use it!

If, on the other hand, your organization has not already systematically evaluated skills, no need to worry. We have some good news for you – you do not have to start from scratch. All those job descriptions that your company has written over the years make a great starting point for discovering the different skills, proficiencies, and capabilities that you value for your different positions. The difficult part is that job descriptions are typically written in prose, which means that you will need to read through the paragraphs and bullets to distill them down to the distinct skills that you can track.

2. Check Out Your Competitors

When it comes to identifying desired skills, your competitors' job postings can be a gold mine. Visit their careers page and look through the different positions for which they are hiring. Not only does this provide insight into the job market in your industry (always valuable information), but doing this research across a wide range of competitors will also help you identify the skills and certifications that consistently pop up for different roles.

3. "Prospect" for Skills on LinkedIn

LinkedIn is another source of valuable information. Highly motivated professionals will proactively tag their skills on their LinkedIn profile. For instance, say you want to know what skills might be valuable for a software developer; just search for that title in LinkedIn and browse some of the promising profiles. You will be able to quickly identify trends and get insight into the skills shared by high performers.

Look for more than just purely technical skills:
- **Soft/professional**
- **Tools/technologies**
- **Hobbies**
- **Languages**
- **Certifications**
- **Industry expertise**
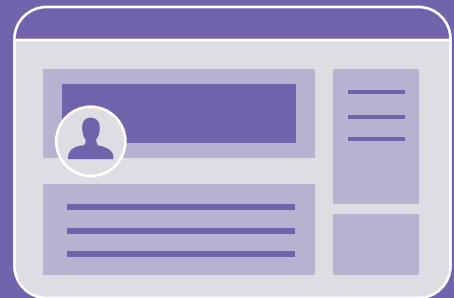
4. Think Broadly

A skill is not necessarily just a functional, job-related capability (e.g. Graphic Design, CSS, C++). When determining which skills to track, it is best to think broadly and consider a range of categories, including: job-specific, soft/professional, tools/technologies, personal/hobbies, languages, certifications, industry expertise, etc.

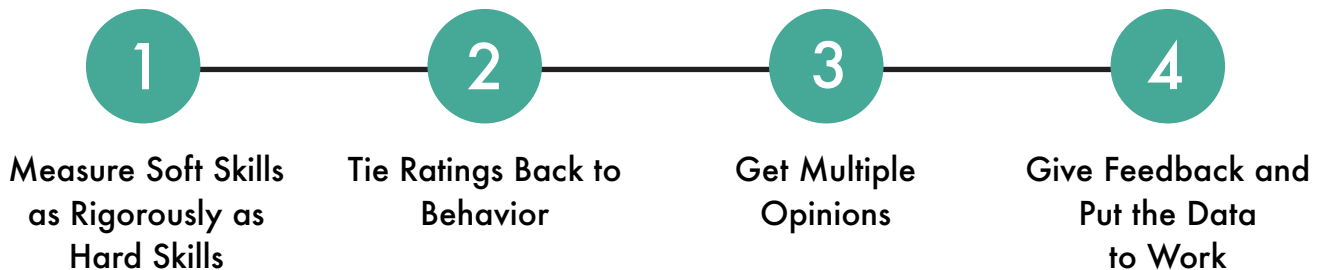Ultimately what you are looking to do is build a living, breathing library of the skills, proficiencies, and certifications that are critical to the success of your business. While some of these skills may not be immediately relevant to the specific role or project you are working on today, they help define the culture of your organization and can be a valuable source of information about your employees down the road.

HR professionals know that soft skills can be just as important as hard or technical skills when it comes to finding, developing, and retaining top talent. In fact, soft skills can often play a huge role in whether a new hire, promotion, or assignment works out in the long run. According to a recent study published by LinkedIn, "92% of respondents say soft skills are more important than technical skill" and "89%...[of] bad hires typically lack soft skills."[1]

With numbers like that, it is no wonder that insight into employees' soft skills is high on the priority lists of many organizations. The problem is, most do not know where to start. Lucky for you, we have some suggestions.

1	2	3	4
Measure Soft Skills as Rigorously as Hard Skills	Tie Ratings Back to Behavior	Get Multiple Opinions	Give Feedback and Put the Data to Work

1. Measure Soft Skills as Rigorously as Hard Skills

Often, there is a resistance to measuring soft skills within an organization, as some people view them as too difficult to quantify. But, if you do not measure proficiency when it comes to these critical soft skills, how are you supposed to put together a comprehensive view of your people?

Just because it is more difficult to measure a softer skill, such as leadership, than a hard skill, such as Java, does not mean it is not worthwhile. By applying the same rigor to your measurement of soft skills, you send a clear message to the organization and raise them in importance in the eyes of both employees and management.

1. Josh Bersin, "LinkedIn 2019 Talent Trends: Soft Skills, Transparency and Trust", 2019, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/linkedin-2019-talent-trends-soft-skills-transparency-trust-bersin

2. Tie Ratings Back to Behavior

By defining the rating scale based on observable behavior, organizations provide managers and employees with a clear set of expectations around how they should evaluate soft skills. For example, look at the following rating scale:

1. Has a desire to learn

2. Just beginning to learn

3. Understands, but has not yet demonstrated

4. Basic understanding and cursory involvement

5. Can articulate and demonstrate inconsistently

6. Can articulate and demonstrate consistently

7. Fully grasps and executes

8. Leads, facilitates, and guides others

9. Acts as an official mentor for others

10. Recognized externally as an expert

Each of these proficiency definitions is tied to behavior that can be observed and measured regardless of the skill in question. This type of rating scale is just as useful for a hard skill like regression analysis as a softer skill like public speaking. By tying ratings back to observable behavior, you will be able to get much greater rating consistency across managers and set clear expectations around what each level of proficiency looks like.

3. Get Multiple Opinions

The wisdom of the crowd can be extremely powerful as a means of nailing down a reliable estimate or approximation of an unknown (or potentially unknowable) figure. Take for instance, the old carnival favorite of guessing the number of jelly beans in a jar. A single person's answer is unlikely to be very accurate, however if you take the average of 5 or 10 people, you are much more likely to approach the true number of jelly beans in the jar. The more individual estimations you add to your calculation, the more likely you are to get close to the actual number.[2]

> "The wisdom of the crowd can be extremely powerful as a means of nailing down a reliable estimate or approximation of an unknown (or potentially unknowable) figure."

2. James Surowiecki, "The Wisdom of the Crowds", Anchor Books, 2005

At this point you might be asking yourself, 'what does this have to do with measuring soft skills?' Well, actually a lot, since soft skills are more difficult to precisely pin down and reliably evaluate. Ideally, soft skills should be evaluated by the employee themselves, their manager, peers, and (if they exist within the organization) any externally recognized experts in that discipline.

4. Give Feedback and Put the Data to Work

All the data in the world is not worth a dime if your business does not put it to use. Once you have the data, use it to uncover hidden skills gaps, provide feedback to employees in the form of targeted, data-driven development plans, and discover people who have the soft skills needed to thrive in leadership positions.
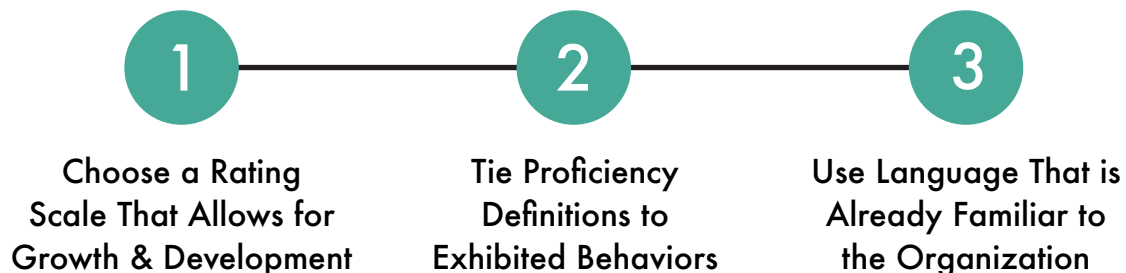
03 How Do We Get Our Leaders Speaking The Same Language?

Getting alignment on the definitions of different dimensions and measures is critical to building analytical applications that generate trusted insights and can be relied on for making real-world decisions. However, getting that alignment is not always easy, and organizations struggle with it every single day.

Think about the classic clashes between sales and marketing. The marketing team has one view of the situation based on how they have defined key metrics, while the sales team has a completely different view – often in direct opposition to what marketing thinks. This lack of consistency breeds distrust in data, animosity between departments, and is a surefire way to discredit a new dashboard or analytical application before it gets off the ground.

When it comes to skills management, the single most important thing you can do is get alignment on the proficiency definitions that will be used to measure skills across the organization. You want to make sure that a rating of a 4 means the same thing to a sales manager as it does to someone in HR or technology.

In effect, what you want to do is create a rating system that can be applied accurately and consistently across the organization by different managers who are rating employees on widely different skills. So, how exactly do you pull that off?

1	**2**	**3**
Choose a Rating Scale That Allows for Growth & Development	Tie Proficiency Definitions to Exhibited Behaviors	Use Language That is Already Familiar to the Organization

1. Choose a Rating Scale That Allows for Growth & Development

Some organizations will want to choose proficiency definitions with a limited range (e.g. a 1-3 rating scale). While this might seem like a good way to improve alignment – after all, there are only three possible ratings, what could go wrong? – it can lead to problems down the road. Take a look at the following example.

1. Needs Improvement

2. Meets Expectations

3. Exceeds Expectations

This scale has two big issues, it does not leave room for growth and the ratings are not specific enough to be applied consistently by different managers. In fact, using this scale will tend to result in highly subjective ratings, because these proficiency definitions are subject to the interpretation of an individual manager – what "Exceeds Expectations" for one may not even "Meet Expectations" for another. That is why we encourage granularity when defining a proficiency rating scale and equip Visual Workforce with a default 10-point scale baked in.

> "We have found that tying proficiency ratings back to how people behave, where a certain skill is concerned, is the best way to build a rating scale that eliminates bias."

2. Tie Proficiency Definitions to Exhibited Behaviors

Whenever possible, it is best to tie proficiency definitions back to actual behavior. In the previous section, we looked at a 1-3 rating system that is used by many organizations in performance reviews. This scale, while simple, is also easily biased. Proficiency definitions like these are tied to manager expectations around the performance of an employee and not their underlying skills.[3] A rock star consultant who meets their manager's expectations will still likely have more finely developed skills than a new college hire who just finished their first project (even if they crushed it).

3. Mackenzie, L., Wehner, J. and Correll, S., "Why Most Performance Evaluations Are Biased, And How To Fix Them", Harvard Business Review, https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-most-performance-evaluations-are-biased-and-how-to-fix-them

We have found that tying proficiency ratings back to how people behave, where a certain skill is concerned, is the best way to build a rating scale that eliminates bias. That way, each rating is based on behavior that can be identified and tracked for skills regardless of team, role, or skill type. This same rating system can be consistently implemented by managers across different departments and applied to hard skills (SQL, C++, QA Testing) just as easily as soft skills (leadership, public speaking, communication).

3. Use Language That is Already Familiar to the Organization

When defining proficiency definitions, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. If your organization already has language around skills and proficiencies that your managers have been trained on, use it! But, do it in a way that minimizes biases and sets your organization up for success by following the advice we have laid out above.
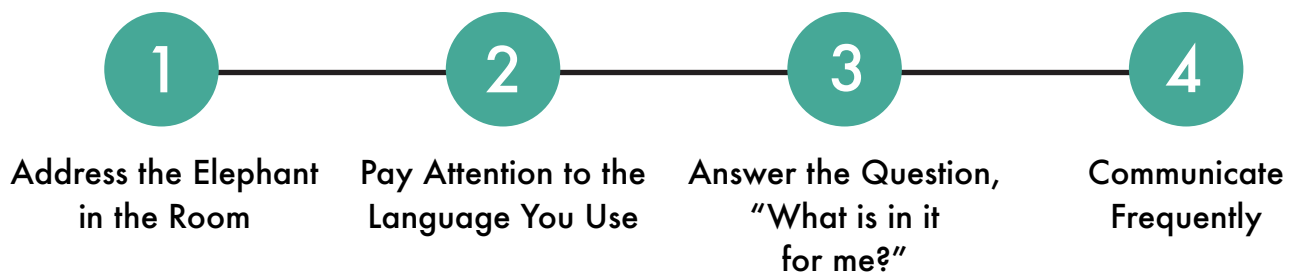
After all, there is nothing worse than collecting a whole bunch of data only to find out it is flawed because people could not agree on what exactly "Exceeds Expectations" means or who is "Advanced" versus just "Intermediate".

04 How Do We Inventory Skills Without Causing Anxiety?

Once you have decided on the skills you want to track and how you want to measure them, it is time to get out there and start collecting data, right? Maybe not quite yet. One thing you will want to consider before sending out a mass email to the entire company is how you are going to message the skills inventory process internally.

Let's face it, change can be intimidating and at many organizations the activities associated with a skills inventory can be seen as a prelude to a big change like layoffs, a reorganization, or even a merger or acquisition. So, what can you do from a communication and delivery perspective to help put your employees at ease? We have identified four tactics that can be put in place to help head off potentially negative reactions to a skills management initiative.

1	2	3	4
Address the Elephant in the Room	Pay Attention to the Language You Use	Answer the Question, "What is in it for me?"	Communicate Frequently

1. Address the Elephant in the Room

If you think your employees are going to have concerns, take the time to acknowledge and address them directly – and do it upfront. Put yourself in their shoes and think about how you would perceive the rollout. That way, you can empathize with them, identify the questions they will likely have, and control the narrative.

2. Pay Attention to the Language You Use

The language we use is a big part of the way that we are perceived by others. Even the choice of calling something a "survey" versus an "assessment" can have a big impact on your employees' reactions. Just think about the images each of those words conjure up. A survey is non-threatening, maybe a bit bureaucratic, but generally inoffensive. An assessment, on the other hand, makes the person feel like they are being tested and serves to put people on edge from the very beginning.

3. Answer the Question, "What is in it for me?"

Skills management initiatives are not only a benefit to the company – done right, they also have a positive impact on the individual. By inventorying the skills of their workforce, HR professionals can more easily identify great internal candidates for new roles, managers can justify budget for training or certification courses, and project leaders can more tightly align an individual's skills with the work that they do on a day-to-day basis. Talk about a win-win scenario!

4. Communicate Frequently

Last, but not least, do not go radio silent after the initial rollout. Embarking on a skills management initiative should be an ongoing, iterative process, and you should communicate frequently with people as you analyze your findings and refine your processes.

Communication is critical – do not go radio silent after the initial rollout!
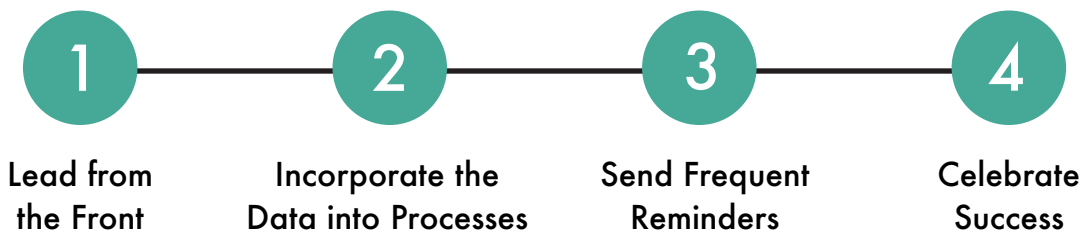
05

How Do We Incentivize Our People To Keep Their Skills Up To Date?

It can be a struggle to get people to do anything on a regular basis, aside from checking Instagram. Yet, a skills inventory that is out of date can be a major blow to the efficacy of a skills management initiative and the overall impact that skills data can have on human capital decisions. So, how can your organization incentivize people to proactively keep their skills up to date?

We have identified four easy steps that any organizations can take to keep skills management top of mind and get long-term buy-in from across the organization.

1	2	3	4
Lead from the Front	Incorporate the Data into Processes	Send Frequent Reminders	Celebrate Success

1. Lead from the Front

There is no more surefire way to have a new initiative fall flat than by not having buy-in and a commitment for follow through from leadership. When it comes to skills management, that means a commitment from leaders – from the C-suite down to line managers – to lead by example and keep their skills up to date in the system. Without this level of commitment, your initiative will be viewed as just a flash in the pan, and you will be hard pressed to get continued engagement.

2. Incorporate the Data into Processes

Another good way to nudge people towards keeping their skills up to date is by incorporating this data into your planning and review cycles. This can be something as simple as using the data to identify potential internal candidates for new roles or requiring managers to use skills data to justify compensation adjustments on their teams. The point is, you are acting on the data and raising its importance within the organization.

> *"Establish a rhythm (and expectations) around updating skills right from start."*

3. Send Frequent Reminders

As with any task – reminders help. There is a fine line between being annoying and being helpful, but your organization should figure out a plan that works for you – Monthly? Quarterly? Annually? – and stick with it. Establish a rhythm (and expectations) around updating skills right from start.
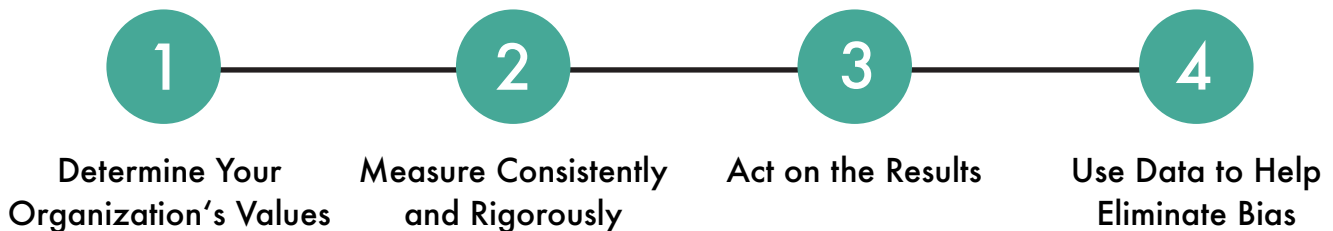
4. Celebrate Success

Last, but not least, take the time to celebrate successes. *Jacob closed a skills gap on his digital marketing team?* Fantastic! Let the other managers know. *Donna executed her training plan and just got that promotion she has been working towards?* Sounds like the perfect time to motivate the troops and point out that they could be doing the same thing.

How Can We Be More Objective When Making Human Capital Decisions?

For decades, HR professionals have been trying to tackle the question, "How can we be more objective when making human capital decisions?" It is an incredibly important question and has never been more relevant than it is today. The opportunity to embrace a more objective, data-driven approach to human capital decision-making is there – organizations just need to put the systems in place to weave the collection, analysis, and use of critical skills data into their existing processes and company culture.

Below are four steps you can take to revolutionize the way you approach human capital decision-making.

1	2	3	4
Determine Your Organization's Values	Measure Consistently and Rigorously	Act on the Results	Use Data to Help Eliminate Bias

1. Determine Your Organization's Values

Whether it is hard skills, soft skills, embodying company values, or anything in between, your organization places value on specific, measurable aspects of an employee's profile and behavior. Identifying these components upfront is critical, because it lays the groundwork for the measurement and analysis phases of any skills management initiative.

2. Measure Consistently and Rigorously

Once you have identified the skills, behaviors, and proficiencies that you care about, it is time to put mechanisms in place to track them across your workforce. Only by consistently applying a rigorous approach to measuring and tracking skills and proficiencies across the organization can you hope to compare employees on even footing. A failure to evenly apply standards across departments, roles, teams, or managers will result in additional bias creeping back into the equation.

3. Act on the Results

Understanding how employees or applicants stack up is one thing; acting on that information when push comes to shove is another. Analytics gives organizations the opportunity to make more objective decisions about their people; but, in order to effect real change, organizations need to embrace a talent and skill-driven company culture.

In his book, *The Sales Acceleration Formula*[4], Mark Roberge, the former Chief Revenue Officer at Hubspot, discusses how he thinks about aligning a person's strengths with the unique context of the business. For example, a sales rep who is a star at Company A, may fail spectacularly at Company B, because their skills are not aligned to what is required by the current context. Likewise, someone who has been successful in a role as your company is growing from 10 to 100 clients, might not be the best person for the job as you look to go from 100 to 1,000 clients. Hubspot used these insights to rate, measure, and track applicants for sales positions against an ideal set of criteria before making a hiring decision. The result? A much more objective (and fruitful) hiring process as they scaled their sales team globally.

> *"Analytics gives organizations the opportunity to make more objective decisions about their people; but, in order to effect real change, organizations need to embrace a talent and skill-driven company culture."*

4. Use Data to Help Eliminate Bias

By relying on data as a key input into human capital decisions, organizations can go a long way towards taking bias (both conscious and unconscious) out of the equation. Armed with insight into the skills, capabilities, and proficiencies of their people, organizations can make more informed human capital decisions based on what their employees can do and how well they do it rather than relying on more subjective measures of fit and performance.

4. Mark Roberge, "The Sales Acceleration Formula", John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015

07 Won't This Take Forever To Roll Out?

Now we come to the question of time. You are likely wondering how long all this will take to roll out – after all, you have other projects and competing priorities to worry about. It is a perfectly reasonable question, especially if you have first-hand experience with the type of static, manual skills management initiatives that have been commonplace across organizations over the past two decades.

We feel your pain and know just how hard skills management can be with the traditional tools that organizations have been forced to rely on for years. That is why we built Visual Workforce. When it comes to manually collecting and analyzing skills data, we have been there, done that, and we never want you to have to do it again.

With Visual Workforce, skills management initiatives do not need to be year-long or even six-month projects. Organizations can leverage out-of-the-box skills libraries, a powerful survey engine, and pre-built visualizations so they can collect and catalogue data about their employees' skills and proficiencies and start generating valuable insights about their workforce in days, not weeks or months.

1	2	3
Start with a Leg Up	Spend Time on What Really Matters	Transform Data into Powerful Insights

1. Start With a Leg Up

Leverage industry-specific skills libraries to quickly build out desired skill sets for different positions. Our skills libraries cover dozens of industries, hundreds of job roles, and thousands of unique skills and can give any organization a head start when it comes to skills management. Whether you work in consulting, advertising, retail, engineering, or anywhere in between, we have skills libraries that will help you get the ball rolling.

2. Spend Time on What Really Matters

Eliminate the manual work required to track and catalogue individual skills through our powerful survey engine. Survey thousands of employees with just a few clicks, quickly collect employee and manager assessments, and send reminders at the touch of a button. All so you can spend more time finding insights and running your business and less time updating data in Excel.

3. Transform Data into Powerful Insights

Get answers in seconds through powerful, pre-built visualizations that automatically populate as data flows into the system through the survey engine. Our intuitive visualizations are designed to help you answer tough, real-world questions about your people, and are built with managers and HR professionals – not data scientists – in mind.

Conclusion

Embracing skills management and workforce visualization has never been more important than it is right now. As organizations continue down the path of digital transformation and remake their business to compete in the global economy, clear insight into the skills, capabilities, and proficiencies of their people will become a central piece in nearly all strategic planning discussions.

This data has the power to transform the way that decisions are made across the enterprise and impact the way everyone operates on a day-to-day basis.

HR Professionals

Visual Workforce enables HR professionals to spearhead a skills management initiative and become a true business partner and positive change agent within their organization.

Project Leads

Visual Workforce helps product leads drive tighter alignment between resource capabilities and project requirements, so they can do more with less and deliver better outcomes every time.

Managers

Visual Workforce arms managers with the insight they need to get the best out of their people, identify skills gaps, use data to justify training, and match the right people with the right jobs.

Executives

Visual Workforce makes it easy to get a comprehensive view of the skills and proficiencies of your people, so you can make strategic, data-driven decisions around workforce planning, risk management, M&A discussions, and managing transitions.

If you're serious about changing the way you understand your people and make human capital decisions, let's talk.

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