

The 2021 Workplace Learning Trends Report

Learning Leads the Future of Work



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Welcome to our annual learning trends report!

We've all experienced the world of work get flipped upside down without warning in 2020. While much of this year has been uncertain, one thing has become undoubtedly clear.

The future of work many of us have been talking about is no longer an eventuality — it's our current reality. Around the world and across industries, organizations are rethinking what work looks like in fundamental ways. And it's on all of us — from senior executives to individual contributors — to provide meaningful solutions to navigate the days, months, and even years ahead.

What does 2021 have in store? If we learned any lessons this past year, it's that anything (and I truly mean anything) is possible. But as 20th-century Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo said, "The art of life is a constant readjustment to our surroundings."

That's what this year's report is about: change and how to adjust to it.

Each trend highlights how workplace learning took shape around the globe and what it means for your organization in 2021. You'll also discover why more upskilling and learning agility will be required to keep pace with the "new normal."

Executive summary

The fast-changing and unpredictable challenges of work may seem unsurmountable. But the learning behaviors of thousands of international businesses on the UdeMy for Business platform and a survey of over 500 global professionals offer a glimpse of the bright future that lies ahead.

In this report, you'll learn:

- Why your organization needs to think beyond job-related skills
- How your workforce can "crack the code" on collaboration
- Why data science isn't just for data scientists anymore
- What skills will reshape software engineering and IT roles

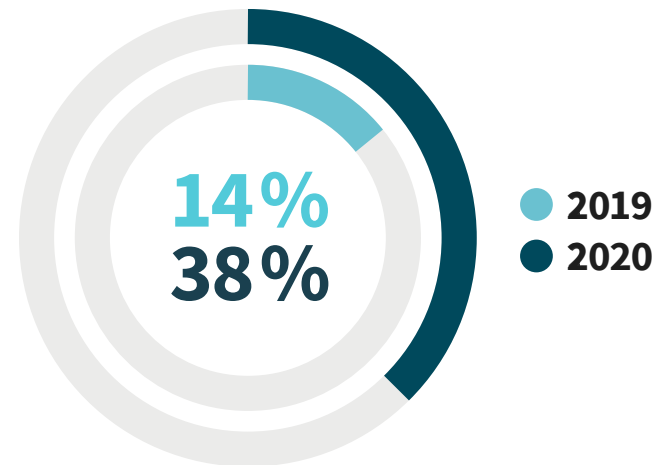
The state of upskilling



Before the pandemic, upskilling was a priority for many organizations, but it's clear that it has now become a business imperative. We see this exemplified in the results of our survey.

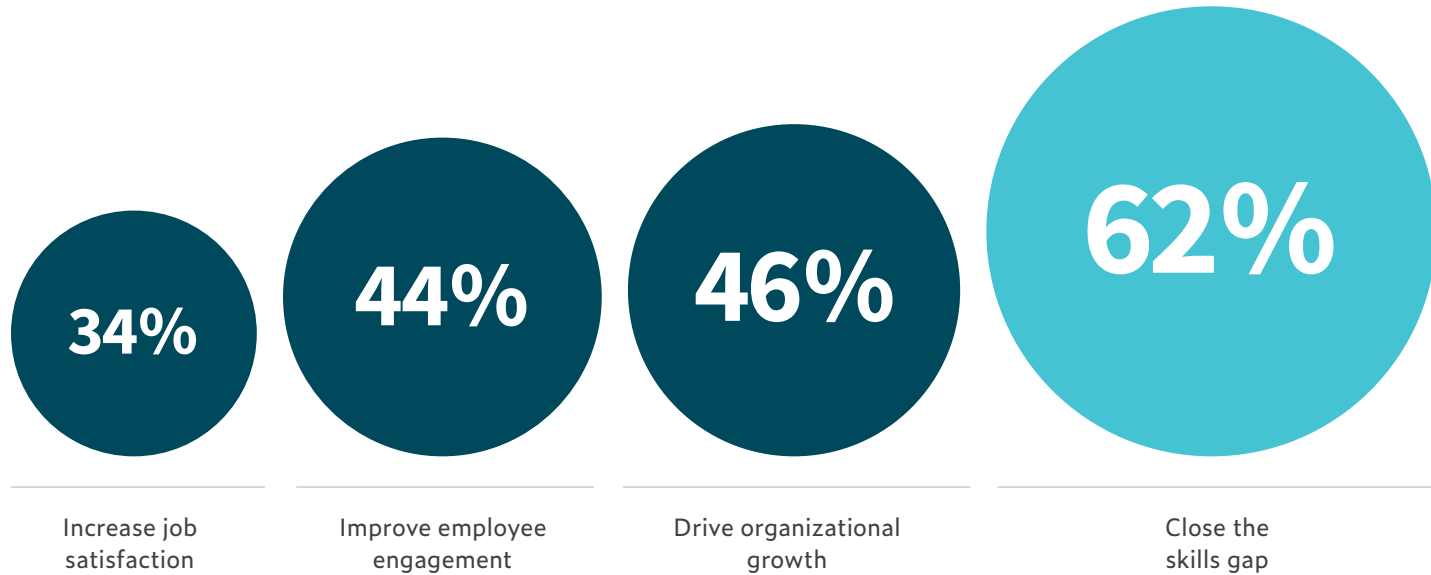
There's a significant uptick in the percentage of the workforce being upskilled or reskilled compared to the previous year. This, according to the data, is driven mostly by a growing number of organizations recognizing the skills gap and their responsibility to fill it.

Estimated % of workforce upskilled in 2019 vs 2020



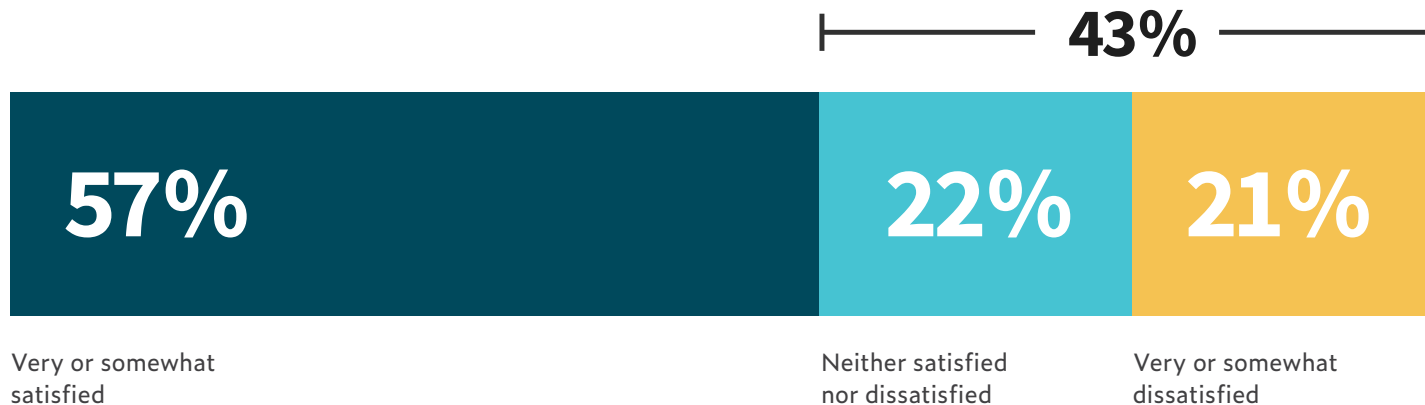
Goals of L&D programs in 2020

(Respondents asked to select top 3)



How satisfied are you with your organization's L&D program?

The increase in upskilling across the globe is impressive and inspiring. But there's plenty of room to grow for learning and development (L&D) in 2021. While over half of survey respondents report being satisfied with their organization's L&D program, almost half are either dissatisfied or indifferent to their program.



Where is your L&D program on Bersin's Learning Organization Maturity Model?

When asked to rate the maturity of their program, however, a bright spot emerges. A large number of organizations would be considered mature with [Bersin's Learning Organization Maturity Model](#).

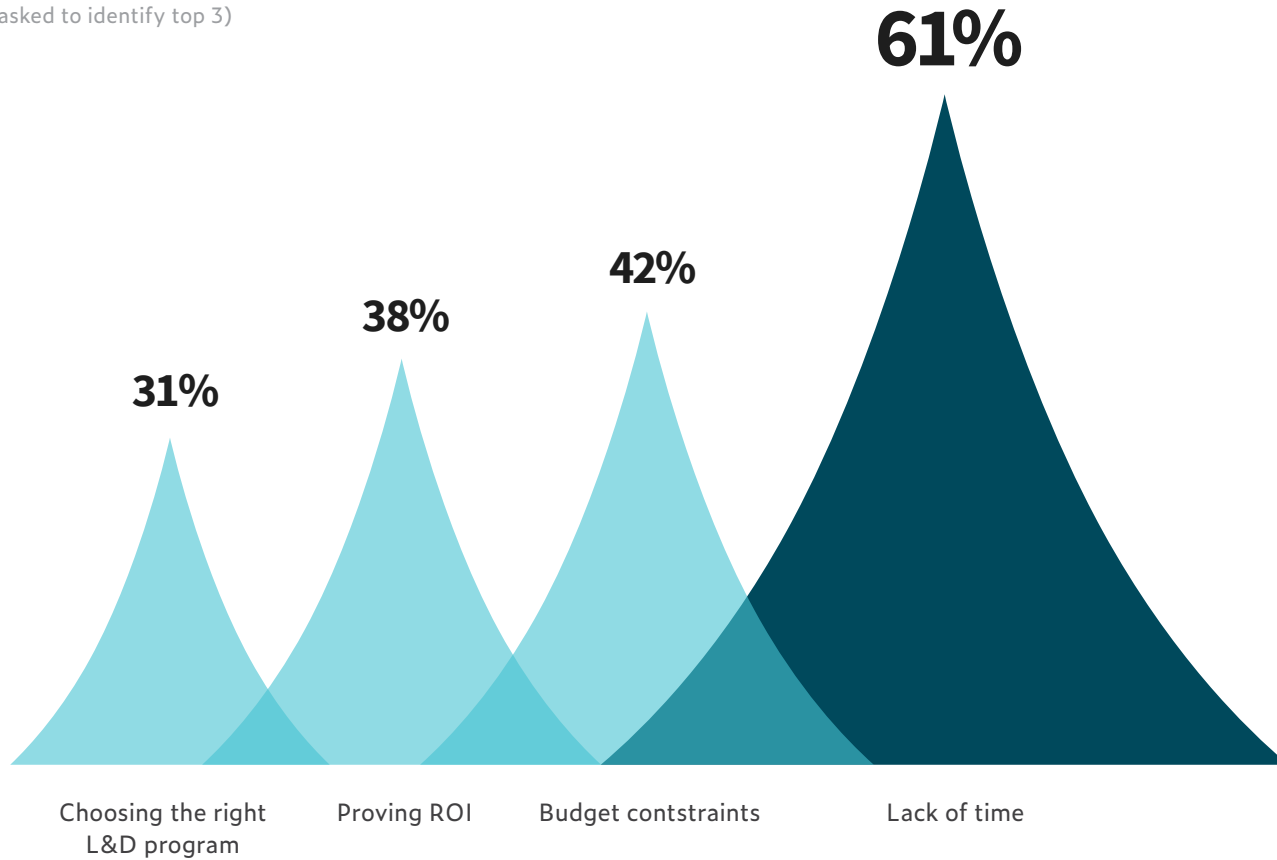
More than half of survey respondents (58%) reported their organization's learning and development program is at level 3 or 4, the highest levels of maturity. These organizations empower their workforce to drive their own development and have integrated learning into the flow of work.

But close to half of organizations (42%) reportedly have fairly traditional approaches to learning and development. What's keeping them — and even the most mature learning and development programs — from achieving their goals? According to our survey, lack of time was reported to be the biggest obstacle.



Obstacles to L&D in 2020

(Respondents asked to identify top 3)



This is the state of upskilling in 2021.

What the future looks like is up to you.

Look for the **Take action** sections throughout this report for actionable advice and best practices to elevate your L&D programs and initiatives — and join a global community of learners actively shaping the state of upskilling for years to come.

Take action

Evaluate your workplace learning culture

Cultivating a culture of learning to upskill your employees makes good business sense. It's simply too expensive for companies to hire their way out of the skills gap.

How strong is your organization's learning culture?

Evaluate it with the [Learning Culture Evaluation Workbook](#) and discover the areas where your culture needs the most improvement.



Trend 1

Amidst uncertainty, self-mastery is a valued skill

Strong mental health and productivity skills have long been described as the essential traits of successful leadership. But studies have shown that they are crucial across your entire organization. The World Health Organization (WHO), for instance, reported that depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy \$1 trillion each year in lost productivity.

Fortunately, the topic of mental health and its effect on workplace productivity has been more frequently discussed in the last few years. And, based on the demand for these skills in 2020, it's safe to say that employees are adamant about mastering their minds and taking control of their time.

Mental health and wellness skills

What was once considered a taboo topic has become a major area of focus for organizations like Starbucks and Unilever, who prioritized the mental health of their workforce before the pandemic. And based on a 4-digit percentage increase in consumption of anxiety management, stress management, and resilience skills on Udeemy for Business, the trend is growing exponentially.

Anxiety management	↑ 3,967%
Resilience	↑ 1,296%
Stress management	↑ 1,015%
Meditation	↑ 886%
Mindfulness	↑ 784%

Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

Productivity skills and habits

In May 2019, the WHO officially recognized and defined burnout as an occupational phenomenon. Since then, organizations have made strides to address the causes. But the increased demand for time management, focus, and self-discipline skills show that the workforce is tackling the challenge head-on.

Time management	↑	990%
Motivation	↑	855%
Focus mastery	↑	810%
Self-discipline	↑	791%
Memory	↑	679%
Goal achievement	↑	581%

Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

What does this mean for your organization?

"Learning and development extends far beyond vertical movement and technical skill development," says Culture Amp Senior People Scientist Sahra Kaboli-Nejad. "This mindset is a fundamental shift to focusing on the whole employee, rather than simply the technical skills related to their outputs or deliverables."

Organizations that prioritize the wellness of their people in 2021 will benefit tremendously, too. For every dollar spent on wellness programs, companies can expect their healthcare costs to decrease by approximately \$3.27.

But business outcomes aren't the only reason for the increased demand for mental health and productivity skills. Today's workers, who've spent their professional lives dealing with uncertainty, are taking a holistic approach to their careers and consider self-mastery an essential skill.

↑
8,660%

Consumption of **mindfulness courses in the Government & Nonprofit sector** compared to 2019

Workplace well-being is even more imperative today. A study conducted in March and April of 2020 found the mental health of almost 42% of respondents had declined since the COVID-19 outbreak began. This could explain why mental health skill consumption on UdeMy for Business has been growing in industries with essential workforces. Government & Nonprofit workers developed and practiced meditation 40,659% more than they did in 2019. Demand for stress management skills grew 5,408% for the Healthcare industry.



5,408%

Consumption of stress management skills in the Healthcare industry compared to 2019

Trend 2

Remote work makes collaboration a priority

When organizations need to solve complex problems, they bring together a diverse team of specialists to come up with innovative solutions. Ironically, research shows that the more experts involved in a collaboration, the more likely it was to fail.

In her [November–December 2019 Harvard Business Review cover story](#), Harvard Business School professor and behavioral scientist Francesca Gino says the secret ingredients of sustainable collaboration — such as effective communication and social awareness — are rare. But a trend in the UdeMy for Business consumption data shows that teams are more aware of the skills needed to “crack the code” on collaboration.



Communication skills

The communication process is often taken for granted, causing teams to navigate a sea of ambiguity and abstraction. But in 2020, the high demand for communication skills shows that teams are learning how to be better listeners and make space for healthy debate — and, more importantly, one another.

Listening skills	↑ 1,650%
Business communication	↑ 1,585%
Business writing	↑ 1,371%
Business etiquette	↑ 1,286%
Conflict management	↑ 890%
Interpersonal feedback	↑ 686%

Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

Leadership skills

Research shows that collaborators who respect one another's ideas, have purposeful conversations, and embrace healthy conflict deliver results. And over the last year, it's become apparent that teams are learning to overcome their biases and hone their cross-functional abilities.

Diversity and inclusion	↑	1,259%
Decision making	↑	1,240%
Strategic thinking	↑	848%
Facilitation	↑	816%
Teamwork	↑	812%
Cultural awareness	↑	708%

Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

What does this mean for your organization?

The slow but steady shift to remote work over the last few years already called for a range of new behaviors and skills. But leaders across every industry were forced to rapidly prioritize solutions that enable entirely distributed teams to collaborate effectively in 2020.

"COVID-19 has really accelerated the shift from 'remote-accessible' to 'remote-first' thinking in collaboration design," says [Sprintkick](#) founder and [Udemy instructor](#) Evan Kimbrell. "It used to be the case that a large organization was considered 'progressive' if they could accommodate one remote worker in each functional team. Now, we're seeing a complete inversion of this paradigm."

Skills consumption related to this trend varies across industries. Listening skills were a particular focus for the Software & Technology industry, where consumption on Udemy for Business grew 3,201%. The Retail industry made an effort to hone its business etiquette skills by increasing consumption 2,042% compared to the previous year.



3,201%

Consumption of listening skills in the Software & Technology industry compared to 2019



2,042%

Consumption of business etiquette skills in the Retail industry compared to 2019

Take action

Promote learning more effectively

Workplace learning and development teams that directly impacted business outcomes have one thing in common — they're clever. They never miss an opportunity to transform their teams and organization through learning and development.

When asked to report their most effective L&D promotion strategies and tactics, company-led workshops and employee resource groups (or ERGs) were ranked the highest. But there are a lot of ways to signal that learning is a priority at your organization. Here are just a few ideas:

Ask leaders to share lessons from their past experiences:

Leadership signals are the most powerful and impactful mechanisms for spreading a culture of learning. Encourage leaders to be vulnerable and admit their mistakes, too. There's a lot of wisdom to be gained from failure.

Include learning in career development and performance

conversations: At least twice a year, share observations of employees' talents, coach them to think through their peak career experiences, and connect them with opportunities to try new things and learn more in areas where they're looking to grow.

Hold postmortems and retrospectives on projects:

Successfully completing a project is a reason to celebrate. It's also an opportunity to reflect and build a culture of healthy feedback. A good postmortem takes an honest look at the completed work and asks, "How can we do better next time?"

“

Workforces with strong data skills across all departments in an organization will benefit the most.



Jose Portilla,
Head of Data Science, Pierian Data Inc.
Udemy data science instructor



Trend 3

Data literacy is the new computer literacy

“Good with numbers? Fascinated by data? The sound you hear is opportunity knocking.” That was the promise of [a 2012 New York Times’ Sunday Review article](#) based on [research published by McKinsey](#) a year earlier.

Eight years later the hype of “big data” has faded. Businesses are inundated with even more proprietary data and very few know how to unlock its potential. But increased consumption of data analysis, data manipulation, and data visualization skills on UdeMy for Business tells us that data science isn’t just for data scientists anymore.

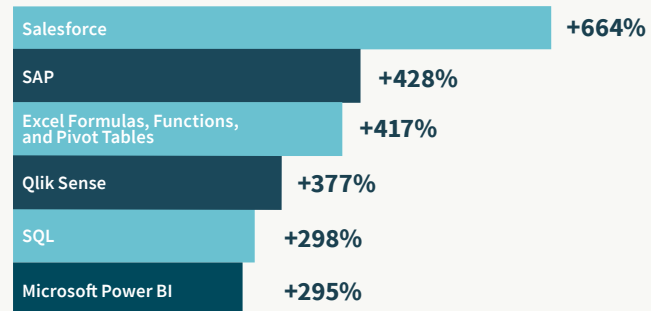


↑
1,411%

**Business intelligence course
consumption in 2020.**

Business intelligence and data analysis skills

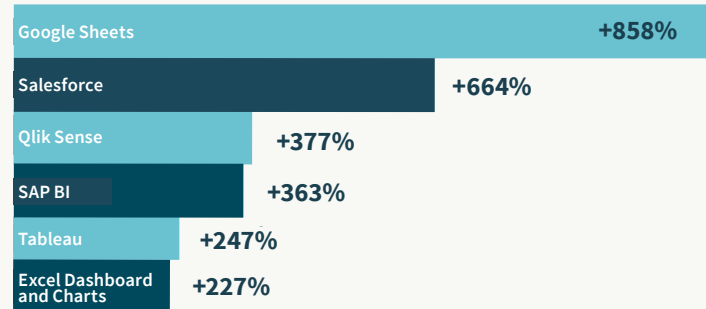
Let's make one thing clear: Product managers and customer experience managers aren't mastering inferential statistics or building regression models. Instead, they're using basic programming and familiar tools to mine data insights.



Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

Data visualization software skills

Data literacy has become important for almost everyone. But those who can interpret data, draw insights, and also communicate the insight to stakeholders will be invaluable to their organization. Consumption of data visualization skills demonstrates that people are learning to leverage advanced data visualization platforms — or use tools readily available to them, like Excel.



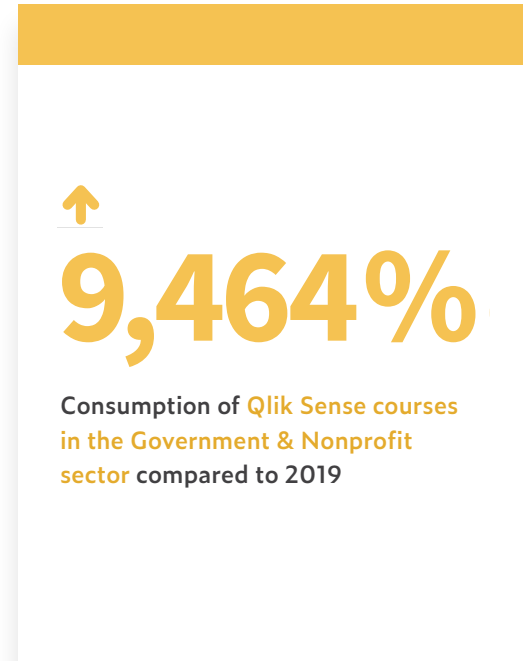
Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

What does this mean for your organization?

“Clear understanding of dashboards, visualizations, and analysis will soon become a default skill set required of any office worker,” says [Pierian Data](#) Head of Data Science and [Udemy data science instructor](#) Jose Portilla, who compares the trend to the moment when basic computer skills became a necessity for workers of past generations.

This trend is also beneficial to data science teams. Workforces with strong data skills across all departments in an organization are more “data self-sufficient” and therefore spend less time distracting data scientists from complex projects.

Business intelligence and business analysis skills increased by 1,694% and 1,282% respectively for the Government & Nonprofit sector on Udemy for Business. And while platforms like Salesforce and SAP are still top choices for the Software & Technology sector, data analytics platform Qlik Sense is popular for Government & Nonprofit organizations.



Take action

Put learning into the flow of (remote) work

Improving the data skills of your entire workforce will give your organization a competitive edge in 2021 and beyond. But if you're worried there's not enough time for employees to learn new data skills (or any skill, really), you're not alone. More than half of survey respondents (61%) say that lack of time prevents their teams from upskilling.

A proven way to overcome this challenge is to put learning into the flow of work — even if your workforce is remote. Here are some suggestions to get started:

Ask employees to create learning goals: In addition to the goals related to job performance and business impact, modern organizations are requiring individuals to set learning goals. This sends a message that learning is a priority and not ancillary to their role.

Set aside dedicated time for learning: At Udemy, employees have a dedicated hour blocked off each month to drop everything and learn. A similar practice at your organization will make it clear to your employees that learning at work is not only accepted, it's encouraged.

Provide access to online learning platforms and other learning experiences: You may not have learning materials already created for what employees need to learn now, but by providing access to an online course catalog like Udemy for Business, you give learners the freedom to discover and set up their own learning pathways.

Trend 4

Automation skills let data scientists focus on strategy

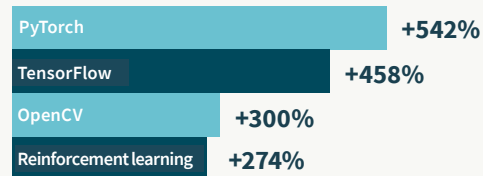
With the growth of data analysis skills, data scientists can now spend more time exploring complex business questions. How? Machine learning techniques that provide insights and predictions far beyond the typical dashboard. But preparing the massive amounts of data needed for those pipelines is no simple task. Automation tools help data scientists speed up the process.

"Recently, huge strides in machine learning and artificial intelligence have allowed for the creation of new data science tools that automate a variety of repetitive tasks," says Jose Portilla. "Data scientists have more time to focus on developing clear business solutions instead of cleaning data."



Machine learning automation skills

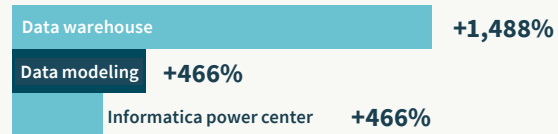
Programming libraries and machine learning techniques power the deep business insights data scientists extract from vast amounts of internal and customer data.



Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

Data automation tools

To free data science teams from the minutiae of manual data preparation, leaders are investing in training teams in data automation tools.



Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

What does this mean for your organization?

Data maintenance and governance are key pieces of a company's data architecture. They're also areas that companies are continuing to untangle from legacy software and data issues.

Humans, not algorithms, are the ones who understand where data is coming from and how it should be used for machine learning purposes. But, to use their time efficiently, companies must equip employees with training in the automation practices their competition is rapidly adopting.

TensorFlow, a popular machine learning library built by Google, saw increased consumption on Udemy for Business across many industries including Software & Technology (+1,599%), Government & Nonprofit (+995%), and Transportation (+463%).



1,599%

Consumption of TensorFlow courses
in the Software & Technology industry
compared to 2019



463%

Consumption of TensorFlow courses
in the Transportation industry
compared to 2019

Take action

Build specialized data science learning paths

By empowering your data scientists of all levels to adapt their skills with the automation tools and machine learning techniques that are transforming their work, you'll see more engaged employees and unlock new business opportunities.

As you tailor data science training to present and future requirements, keep these tips in mind:

Connect each learning path to business outcomes:

When considering which data science proficiencies are needed, outline how each training path directly aligns to the company's goals. This helps secure buy-in from executive stakeholders. It also allows employees to see the direct connection between a technical skill set and a business outcome.

Create a skill-specific mentorship program:

To build engagement for a data science-specific training program, go a level deeper than the typical mentorship program and offer participants the chance to cultivate relationships with data science colleagues across the organization.

Offer regular social learning opportunities:

Whether it's through a monthly lunch and learn session or chat channels dedicated to each training path, learning from peers is an essential tool to increasing skill proficiency in a casual environment.

Trend 5

Farewell silos, hello hybrid tech roles

In the spirit of agile project management, many technical teams are moving away from single domain expertise. Rather, hybrid roles are becoming the norm as leaders encourage employees to build expertise in more than one subject directly related to their job function.

"With the adoption of agile and DevOps plus the continued budgetary pressures of doing more with less within IT, tech professionals can no longer be one-dimensional," says Doug Redfield, Senior Director of Architecture and Governance at BMC Software. "They must become experts at more than one discipline to be effective."

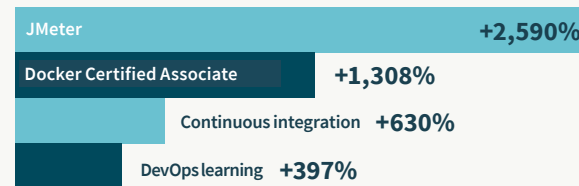
QA testers and developers, if not already functioning in hybrid roles, are working closely together to expedite project completions. Likewise, IT specialists are mastering cloud computing platforms and infrastructure, moving beyond help center or security specializations.



DevOps skills

Skills and techniques related to software testing and the entire software development lifecycle grew by 370% in 2020.

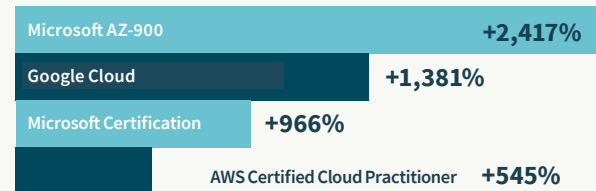
The topics in this area are expansive and can vary from company to company. However, as we consider the trend of hybrid roles, anyone in software development might see interest in the skills grow over the next year.



Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

Cloud computing skills

As digital transformation is realized across organizations, cloud computing tools are a vital skill for developers and IT specialists alike. The leaders in the space — Amazon AWS, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud — offer certifications that validate employee knowledge levels and ensure they're using platform features to their full potential.



Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

What does this mean for your organization?

Your technical employees certainly aren't expected to become a master of all. There may always be some need for hyper-specialized roles. But in most cases, anyone who touches software development should expect their career path to reflect the principle of "learning in the flow of life," as [Deloitte says](#).

"The more skills a team member has, the better they can understand more parts of the product," says Evan Kimbrell, Udemy instructor and founder of Sprintkick, a digital app agency. "The more parts they understand, the better and more insightful their decision-making becomes. Silo-ing your engineers in one department is not the best way to utilize an organization's human capital."

As companies embraced agile practices through hybrid roles, DevOps and cloud computing skills rose in 2020. More specifically, consumption of Google Cloud courses on the Udemy for Business platform increased by 1,189% in the Manufacturing industry. And continuous integration, a DevOps topic, grew by 693% in the Retail industry, reflecting an eagerness to get product updates to customers faster.



1,189%

Consumption of **Google Cloud courses** in the **Manufacturing industry** compared to 2019



693%

Consumption of **continuous integration courses** in the **Retail industry** compared to 2019

Trend 6

Cybersecurity training takes on a new urgency

As global workforces went remote because of COVID-19, cybersecurity took on new urgency for IT teams. Employees were no longer within the secure digital network of the office and many started using personal devices for work.

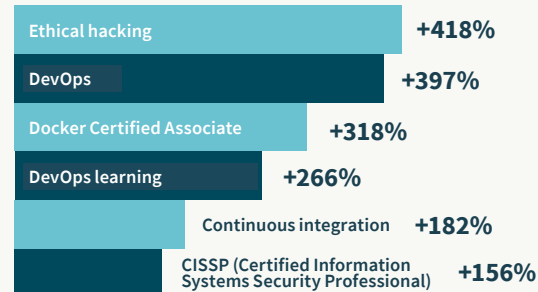
“With remote work here to stay, IT leaders must examine the security gaps in every part of the organization’s network,” says [Nathan House, Udemy instructor](#) and CEO of cybersecurity consultancy [Station X](#).

What’s at stake? [According to PwC](#), not only do organizations with poor security practices risk financial loss, but their intellectual property, employee data, customer data, and hard-earned reputation are at risk as well.



Cybersecurity skills

As employees transitioned to working from their home offices, consumption of courses related to digital security spiked. General topics like information, network, wireless, and web security saw notable growth as IT teams of all sizes created a safe remote workforce.



Percentage growth compared from 2019 to 2020

What does this mean for your organization?

Malwarebytes found that "44% of respondents' organizations did not provide cybersecurity training that focused on potential threats of working from home (like ensuring home networks had strong passwords, or devices were not left within reach of non-authorized users)."

Organizations must protect their employees and bottom line with continuous security training for all technical teams and training for all employees in cybersecurity best practices. Security is every employee's responsibility, especially as they work from home. Consider implementing initiatives like single sign-on and multifactor authentication.

In order to discover website vulnerabilities ahead of bad actors, the Media industry saw increased interest in Ethical Hacking on the UdeMy for Business platform by 5,598%. General cybersecurity skills became a priority for the Consumer Goods and Services industry where consumption grew by 6,343%.



5,598%

Consumption of **ethical hacking courses in the Media industry** compared to 2019



6,343%

Consumption of **cybersecurity courses in the Consumer Goods and Services industry** compared to 2019

Take action

Three reasons your organization needs to prioritize learning in 2021

A strong learning culture empowers employees to upskill themselves in the face of change and continually grow their skills and adapt to new challenges.

However, in times of great change, learning is often one of the first things to be defunded and deprioritized because more shortsighted organizations view it as something that's just "nice to have." In fact, 42% of survey respondents reported "lack of budget" as the biggest obstacle they faced in 2020.

Here are three compelling reasons you can use to make the case for learning and prove that it's not just an employee perk, but also business critical.

A learning culture is critical for keeping up with workplace transformation: The workplace is changing so fast that many companies are struggling to keep up. Companies that treat learning as a strategic asset understand this and keep moving forward.

A learning culture can help close our skills gap: Losing highly skilled employees can be a significant drain on company resources. [Gallup estimates](#) a 100-person company with average attrition rates spends between \$660K-\$2.6M on turnover and replacement.

A learning culture fuels innovation: When upskilling is encouraged and available, employees are more likely to experiment and innovate. [Case studies](#) from companies like Accenture and DBS Bank have shown that learning powers curiosity and company performance.

Let's move forward together —

no matter what comes next

We all learned a very important lesson in 2020. Traditional training approaches were built for a world we don't live in anymore and can't keep up with the pace of change we're experiencing. Your organization's success greatly depends on more upskilling and a strong culture of lifelong learning. And it's up to leaders like you to make it happen.

But you don't have to do it alone. With Udemy for Business, your workforce can access and learn the skills needed to prepare for whatever comes next.

Find out why Unilever, Prudential, and thousands more organizations have partnered with us to prepare their workforce for the future.

[Request a demo](#) and speak to one of our learning experts today.

Request a demo today



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We offer a learner-first approach that delivers an engaging experience personalized to an individual's interests and needs. Our content covers key

business and technical topics ranging from development and IT to leadership, marketing, design, stress management, and more. In addition to a curated content collection for professional and personal growth, organizations can host and distribute their own proprietary content on Udemy.

Leading organizations including Eventbrite, Adidas, Booking.com, Pinterest, and HSBC choose Udemy for Business as their strategic learning partner to upskill their workforce and move skills forward. Learn more at <https://business.udemy.com/learning-for-leaders>.

Methodology

The 2021 Workplace Learning Trends Report is based on data from the learning behavior of thousands of global companies using the Udemy for Business platform and a survey of over 500 Learning and Development professionals.

Skills data compares the consumption of courses in the Udemy for Business collection from January 1, 2019–August 1, 2019 to January 1, 2020–August 1, 2020. All courses are associated with topics, with each course having up to five topics. These topics are what you see as the trending skills within the report. For courses with multiple topics, consumption minutes are divided equally across all topics associated with those courses.

From August 19, 2020 to September 10, 2020, 528 global Learning and Development professionals completed a 16-question survey on the current state of their companies' training programs.