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Responsible  
Business Network



Report

# UPSKILLING FOR ALL

Supporting low-skilled employees  
to progress at work



# REPORT

## UPSKILLING FOR ALL: SUPPORTING LOW SKILLED EMPLOYEES TO PROGRESS AT WORK

“For most low-paid workers, poorly-paid positions are not acting as a first rung on the ladder – it is the only rung.”<sup>1</sup>

Creating meaningful employment is one of the most significant ways that businesses can support individuals to break out of poverty. A good job is one that offers security, rights, a fair income and the opportunity for personal development and progression. Yet people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are far less likely to progress at work than their wealthier peers. For many low-income individuals securing a job does not mean upward social mobility, but rather they are perpetually stuck in a low-skill, low-pay cycle.

Working in collaboration with Phoenix Group, Business in the Community (BITC) launched a project to understand why lower-skilled employees are less likely to participate in upskilling than their higher-skilled colleagues and to identify solutions to equip employers to support every employee to develop their skills throughout their career, regardless of their starting point. Throughout the project, we uncovered many examples of employers making great strides in upskilling their workforce. We hope that by sharing some of these and the demonstrable benefits they have for businesses, as well as for the people they're intended to help, more organisations will be inspired to consider Upskilling for All.



## Foreword from Phoenix Group

### Whose responsibility is it to ensure you have the skills to be effective in your job?

One of the businesses involved in the project shared their incredible journey of employee engagement and upskilling, after asking their workforce this question and realising most of their employees were not owning or sharing their responsibility to maintain and update their work skills.

It has been the question I have asked myself most frequently since, because understanding the answer gets straight to the heart of the ambition of Upskilling for All.

An ageing population is a global mega-trend that employers are slowly switching onto in terms of the opportunities and the risks for their consumers and their colleagues. One implication will be the emergence of 50- or 60-year careers. A daunting prospect, perhaps bringing with it the need for us all to adapt more often and make more changes in the course of our careers.

Longer lives could be a huge opportunity for those wealthy enough to choose when and how they work and retire. And for those in knowledge-based jobs, which often can more easily flex and evolve to changes. But longer lives could also bring significant challenges for the millions of people who are already living in poverty during their working lives. Equally, it could also add further risk and challenge to people who are in precarious and unpredictable work or physically demanding jobs.

In this post 'job for life' era, lifelong learning is not a nice to have. It becomes the critical enabler to job security and successful, longer, working lives. Employers therefore need to be thinking about this responsibility to ensure the workforce has the skills to be effective. Engaging all employees to keep learning, maximizing their skills and contribution at work today, and growing their possibilities in the future is an increasingly important part of being a responsible business.

At Phoenix Insights, the longevity think tank set up by Phoenix Group, we want to help society make the most of the opportunities of longer lives, and the gift of extra time. Engaging everyone in learning, particularly people with lower qualification levels, is critical to ensuring this mission is inclusive. I urge you to use the examples in this report to inspire your organisation to do more, and to engage more colleagues in learning and skills.

Catherine Sermon, Phoenix Group

## Identifying the building blocks of upskilling

Upskilling for All used BITC's collaborative social innovation methodology, consisting of a sequence of activities that seek to find solutions to specific challenges, enabling us to develop and deliver insights and resources, equipping businesses to take impactful action.

The investigation phase consisted of a rapid, in-house literature review to identify initiatives to help individuals identify their skillsets, a YouGov survey to identify current levels of confidence in terms of skills identification among different groups and a series of stakeholder interviews (employers and skills sector organisations) to identify existing skills interventions.

## Key findings

### A literature review

- Across the range of skills identification and development methodologies that have been developed and tested, the approaches that included a coaching element to guide individuals through the process were found to be more effective.
- Barriers to engagement with skills development for individuals included economic, logistical, time availability, demographics across age, race, hours worked, socioeconomics, confidence, the ability to transfer learnings to the working environment and a general level of disengagement with learning.
- There is a clear business case for developing the skills of the workforce, in

terms of driving innovation and growth. However, businesses experience various barriers to developing skills. These include inadequate and deprioritised investment, recruiting in rather than developing skills internally, narrow and routinised job design creating a lack of skilled opportunities, and a lack of trained managers for on-the-job skills development.

- Line managers play a critical role in nurturing skills development and progression. However, too often, line manager roles focus on the logistics and organisation of work without time for development conversations, especially in lower-paid and front-line sectors.
- Individuals need to be enabled to identify skills gaps and develop new skills through a culture of lifelong learning, where employers are seen to invest in and support an environment of learning embedded at individual, team, and organisational levels.

- Less likely to undertake any training or development activities at all in their current role (45% vs 14%).



### Stakeholder interviews

We asked a range of employers to identify drivers of learning and development. The most frequently cited were:

- Senior leaders: whether due to an individual passion for investing in people, a desire for an organisational culture change or an understanding of the business case and operational needs, an engaged and committed senior leader was identified as vital to effective skills development across a business.
- Business operational needs: many organisations, particularly those in sectors undergoing deep transformation, e.g. due to climate change, identified the need to fill current and future skills gaps as a key driver of learning at work, especially in a tight labour market. Most also recognised skills development as necessary to improve employee retention.
- Culture and brand: interviewees with the greatest amount of learning and development activity said that culture and brand were important drivers to committing to developing their workplace. Many also cited diversifying senior levels of the organisation as a factor in decisions to upskill.

### YouGov Survey

A YouGov survey<sup>ii</sup> commissioned by BITC in 2023 found that low-skilled workers have far fewer development and progression opportunities than other employees. Compared to their higher-skilled peers, low-skilled workers are:

- Less likely to feel that their current job makes good use of their skills and abilities (55% vs 76%)
- Less knowledgeable about the new skills that they will need to progress their career (48% vs 70%)
- Less likely to have been encouraged to gain the skills needed for more senior roles (26% vs 57%)
- Less likely to believe that they have equal opportunity to advance, regardless of their personal characteristics or circumstances (45% vs 66%)

When asked to identify routes to overcoming barriers to upskilling, popular responses were:

- Line managers need to upskill to grow the capabilities and confidence of their direct reports and be given the tools to do it well.
- Employees need to understand the learning opportunities that are available to them and how they are linked to their progression.
- The allocation of dedicated resources and time for upskilling is one of the most relevant factors for engagement.

## The building blocks of upskilling

Drawing on the findings of our investigation phase, we identified three building blocks to effective upskilling. We sought out case studies to demonstrate what had already worked well in each area.

### Building block 1: an effective data strategy.

Businesses need to know where their current skills gaps lie and the new skills that they are likely to need in the future. They also need to understand the impact of the development opportunities on offer so that they can ensure maximum impact for the investment.

Discover how:

- Severn Trent Water identified skills gaps caused by an ageing workforce.
- Business in the Community uses data to stay on track to meet organisational ambitions.
- Ricoh assesses workforce skills to create opportunities for development

**Building block 2: supportive and supported line managers.** Line managers need to have the capability and the motivation to develop their direct reports.

Find out how:

- Amey ensures its line managers make time for development conversations.
- HS2 upskills managers at every level of their business.
- Capita uses the language of Essential Skills to inform development.

**Building block 3: a culture of continuous learning across the business.** It is not enough to provide learning and development opportunities, employees need to be driven and empowered to engage with them.

Learn how:

- Coventry Building Society's employees are encouraged to focus on the future.
- Amey's learners determine their own career path.
- Thames Water sells the individual benefits of training.
- Boots encourages every colleague to take time out for learning.

### Building block 1: an effective data strategy Using data to identify skills gaps

There is a significant and growing skills shortage in the UK: 94% of workers will need upskilling by 2030<sup>iii</sup>. As the majority of the 2030 workforce is already in employment, businesses must invest in learning and development if they are to survive long-term. However, fewer than half of employers use data to identify skills gaps.<sup>iv</sup> Without this information, it is impossible to target upskilling effectively.

#### How Severn Trent Water used data to identify skills gaps and targeted learning and development opportunities to close them

Like other utility sector organisations, Severn Trent Water is facing an ageing workforce and a

shortage of technical and engineering-related skills in the labour market. Recognising that they needed a long-term, strategic approach to talent management, they used business and industry trend data to identify the roles that were likely to be difficult to recruit for and where they would have shortages in the business in the medium term.

Severn Trent spotted that in some roles, they had twice the ratio of employees aged 60+ compared to other water companies and that their Waste operational frontline roles could be particularly vulnerable, with nearly one-fifth of employees anticipated to retire in the next five years. Recognising that apprenticeships are an effective way to get the skills you need into your business, Severn Trent considered what was already available and found that there was no Level 2 Waste/Water Operative standard. Wanting to create an entry-level pathway into the business, they led a trailblazer group across the Water sector and set about scoping a new apprenticeship standard. Having already established an Academy, Severn Trent decided to be the training provider, as well as the employer for the new standard, drawing on the Apprenticeship Levy to fund a bespoke team to deliver it.

“Although delivering the course isn’t right for every employer”, explains Sarah Harris, Head of Academy at Severn Trent, “we’ve found that there are lots of benefits to it. We have absolute certainty that the people teaching have the right level of knowledge that they need to deliver the learning; we aren’t limited to the academic year like normal FE colleges are, meaning that we can be flexible about when we take on new cohorts, doing it as and when it works for the business; and we can take the resources that have been developed for the course and share them with other colleagues wanting to retrain in our Bootcamps, maximising our return.”

The Level 2 Waste/Water Operative apprenticeship has been instrumental in helping Severn Trent address a potential future skills shortage. The projected talent gap has been reduced by the 135 apprentices; retention rates are over 90%, and

there has been a 100% pass rate to date (40% passing with Distinction).

“We’re hugely proud of what we’ve achieved so far and we’re continuing to explore new apprenticeship routes into the business”, says Sarah. “Key to our success has been putting business needs at the heart of our L&D strategy; it’s much easier to get everyone on board when they can see the clear benefit to them. And you can only really understand business need by really crunching data – at a business and at an industry level”.

### How Business in the Community uses data to ensure it has the skills needed to fulfil organisational ambitions

Business in the Community is the UK’s leading network for responsible business. An SME with 260 employees, recognised the need to embed many of the examples of good practice that they urge their large employer members to do.

In 2022, BITC introduced a Skills and Development Matrix, an interactive tool for all colleagues to access information about the core capabilities and skill levels for their own roles, and all other roles across the organisation.

“A key strand of our employee proposition is the provision of great colleague development so that everyone can grow and thrive in their roles and be their best at work”, says Liz Cox, Learning and Development Manager at BITC. “We know from colleague feedback that staff want to be proactive about planning a career pathway and colleagues had expressed in the past that there was a lack of clear understanding of the skills pertinent to their own roles which made robust tailored development planning hard. Colleagues also said that having a clearer view of the skills in other roles within BITC would help them formulate their development plans if they had aspirations to grow and develop to move into different roles in the organisation.

“Our vision was to address this with a simple tool that would highlight the capabilities for each role in

the organisation, enabling colleagues to map themselves and their current capability level against potential development opportunities and roles. Accordingly, we set up a working group with members of the HR team, Senior Leads and our Insights and Impact Team to develop our Skills and Development Matrix”.

From a colleague perspective, the matrix has enhanced quarterly development conversations with line managers, enabling a more tailored approach to development plans. But it has also had broader organisational benefits, as Liz explains. “The matrix helps us identify and articulate gaps in relation to the skills that we need to meet our core organisational ambitions; armed with this information, we can communicate learning priorities clearly and consistently and really focus our energy and resources on development that will have the biggest organisational benefit.”



### How Ricoh UK uses data to identify and develop talent and leadership potential

Ricoh UK’s talent programme has been designed to identify and develop talent and leadership potential within the organisation, with a particular focus on the top female talent, and to foster cross-functional knowledge by breaking down silos across the business. To achieve this, Ricoh UK adopted the Wave-i solution developed by Saville Assessment, a leading provider of psychometric assessments to assess and develop potential and performance in the workplace.

The initiative was split into two cohorts consisting of senior people managers and their direct reports.

All participants completed the Saville Assessment’s Wave Professional Styles questionnaire, which powers the Wave-i solution, with the results feeding into multiple objectives of the programme. From an organisational perspective, the main objective was to create an overall view of Ricoh UK’s leadership potential with the ability to drill down into divisional pictures of talent potential.

On an individual level, the data informed nominations for mentoring, sponsorship, and other training and development initiatives. All participating employees were provided with career development advice and actionable suggestions through a personalised career development report. These reports fed into the employees’ end-of-year performance reviews and setting of development plans for the year ahead.

As Rebecca Rodger, Apprentice & Talent Development Manager at Ricoh UK, explains: ‘The process was not about Ricoh telling people what they are going to be, rather about facilitating change and instigating conversations about potential with individuals and what leadership development would look like for them.’

### Using data to measure the impact of training

BITC research shows that low-skilled workers participate in fewer formal training opportunities than their higher-skilled colleagues,<sup>v</sup> which makes it more difficult for them to upskill and therefore progress their careers. Although nearly two-thirds of employers provide training<sup>vi</sup>, from our conversations with employers it became clear that many do not measure the impact of the opportunities they provide. Without this information, it is harder to build the business case for further development.

### Using data to target development opportunities

The 70:20:10 Model for Development suggests that 70% of learning comes from on-the-job training, 20% from working with others and just 10% from formal interventions and planned learning solutions. As such, work allocation can have a

significant impact on a person's opportunity for upskilling.

### Building block 2: supported and supportive line managers

#### Making time for line managers to support the development of their direct reports

Middle managers report spending almost three-quarters of their time on tasks not directly related to talent management<sup>vii</sup>, meaning many may struggle to find the time to provide adequate development support to their staff.

#### Making time for development conversations at Amey

Amey is a UK-based infrastructure support service provider. They pride themselves on creating a culture where each and every employee has the support they need to grow and excel.

Learning and development is not just the preserve of HR; responsibility is delegated to each business area, and then through the different levels from director to manager to supervisor. Continuous Performance Management training is offered regularly to ensure that every employee with a direct report is upskilled to manage people, including specific guidance on supporting staff at each end of the performance scale.

Each line manager is empowered to decide what upskilling is best for their team, allowing them a degree of flexibility in delivery; however, there are clear expectations set in terms of elements such as the frequency of development conversations. They are encouraged to adopt a tutor-like approach with their direct reports, guiding them towards different opportunities for personal and professional growth, as well as being supported to take on some individual responsibility for their own development.

#### Upskilling line managers to support the development of their team

To manage people effectively, line managers need to be supported in developing their own people skills and self-confidence. As such, there is a need for newly appointed managers to receive

appropriate training, as well as ongoing development and support for more experienced ones. Unfortunately, all too often, line managers don't feel they have the full suite of skills that they need: 45% of people managers say that they lack the confidence to help their direct reports learn the skills they need.<sup>viii</sup>

#### Enhancing management capability is a priority for HS2

HS2 has put in place a suite of initiatives to support the learning and development at all levels of leaders and managers in the business, ensuring that they are equipped to carry out every element of their job, including delivering performance feedback and communicating change.

The Level 5 Operations & Departmental Management Apprenticeship is designed to support aspiring first-line and middle managers to develop their leadership and management skills while working towards a professional qualification. Approximately 60% of the people who complete the apprenticeship go on to move into management roles within the organisation.

Every person who joins HS2 as a line manager (either from outside the business or through an internal promotion) is required to complete the Management Fundamentals course within six months of taking on the role. Developed to equip them with the fundamentals required to lead and manage their teams effectively, the course is delivered online, with ongoing support provided via e-learning videos and toolkits sourced from the Learning Resource Hub.

The Management Discovery Programme is aimed at mid-level line managers; although it's optional, up to 90% of eligible colleagues participate in it. A year-long programme, it dedicates a whole module to managing people, covering difficult conversations, developmental conversations, managing performance, coaching skills, motivation and Diversity and Inclusion. A key part of this programme is the Insights Discovery profiling tool, which helps individuals to understand themselves and their colleagues better so that they can form



more respectful, productive and effective working relationships.

“So often, people become line managers because they’re good at their job,” says Branwen Brighton, Talent and Learning Manager. “An while that is important, managing people requires a specific set of skills. A supportive line manager is key to getting the best out of people, so it makes absolute sense to invest in boosting this capability.”

### Using a common language of skills

Consistency in the language used to describe skills helps managers gain visibility of the skills of their employees, identify skills gaps, and make better decisions about internal mobility.

### How Capita’s common language of skills aids development across the whole organisation

Capita, a global leader in business process outsourcing and professional services, recognised the importance of staying ahead in the skills and competencies game and ensuring the development of their workforce. Through the implementation of its Career Pathway Framework (CPF), the company is making training and upskilling more accessible to everyone in the business.

Capita initiated its CPF by creating a set of behavioural and leadership competencies for the whole organisation and conducted a thoughtful analysis to ensure that the competencies resonated with colleagues globally, aligning with current and future needs.

The result was a set of ten behavioural competencies applicable to all employees, and seven leadership competencies for every leader in any hierarchy and to aspiring leaders, making this development accessible to anyone with the aspiration to lead.

For Zia Aftab, Group Performance and Development Manager at Capita, the use of a common language became pivotal: “From a language perspective, we needed to ensure that

we articulated descriptions so that people could relate to them and they understood what the competency was, what knowledge and experience they needed, and actually, how could they demonstrate it within their role”.

Capita's CPF served as the foundation for various programmes launched across the organisation, such as the Management and Leadership Academy and Professional Development opportunities, which rely on the behavioural competencies outlined in the framework. These competencies are a point of reference and serve as a guiding light for employees, irrespective of their location within the global organisation.

In addition to the behavioural competencies, Capita recognised the importance of integrating technical elements into their CPF and creating specific career family structures to define pathways for employees, both vertically and laterally. To support upskilling and career progression, employees are encouraged to consider their developmental goals within their existing role or when transitioning to a new role. This process involves a balance between behavioural and technical competencies, in addition to gaining on-the-job experience and accessing relevant learning opportunities.

To further enhance employees’ development, Capita mapped professional development programmes to their competency framework. Employees can now easily identify learning opportunities, from entry-level to advanced, and the organisation is able to guide and support them, ensuring that colleagues at all stages of their careers have access to relevant resources for their own development.

To measure the impact of the CPF, Capita employs various metrics and assessments. They conduct self-assessments through tools like "My Compass" to identify development needs and track the completion of development needs analysis -DNA- and the times people access the learning resource. Although the framework is still under development, Capita intends to delve deeper into granular analysis once all career families are incorporated.

Career Pathways Framework has had a profound impact on Capita: “It goes beyond just learning; it paves the way for a more connected, performance-driven, and culturally aligned organisation”, says Zia, and highlights that “employees now have a clear roadmap for career progression, fostering healthy conversations between managers and their teams and boosting employee-focused growth”.

### Building block 3: a culture of continuous learning across the business

#### Empowering employees to set their own learning goals

Goals are intended to help employees improve, so it makes sense to get their buy-in. Encouraging individuals to set their own stretch goals gives them a sense of ownership, acting as a powerful motivator for ongoing development.<sup>ix</sup>

#### How Coventry Building Society helps employees ‘be brilliant in their way’

Aspire is Coventry Building Society’s performance framework with a difference. Introduced in 2021, it was developed to encourage great conversations between managers and direct reports and empower individuals to set their own goals.

This was a result of gathering feedback from hundreds of leaders and colleagues who were frustrated with the traditional approach to performance management. Feedback suggested that objectives weren’t always strategically aligned, and the process felt more like an administrative exercise, rather than an effort to really drive performance. Wanting to design a new approach that would “help people to be brilliant in their way”, Coventry tasked a cohort of future leaders to help with creating and implementing a completely new performance framework.

Instead of assessing past performance, Aspire asks what each individual wants to achieve. Using this system, Coventry was able for the first time to identify high-potential colleagues across all job grades; 40% of this population went on to secure

new roles internally, contributing to a culture of personal growth and development.

“Aspire has been designed to give each individual the opportunity to shine,” explains Andrew Bailey, Head of Talent. “The pandemic upended everything about modern work. We quickly recognised that it was an important moment for us to transform our approach to better align with hybrid work and the needs of our people. Rather than getting caught up in our own functions and roles, we are encouraged to think about our shared goals, and how we can support and empower each other. This helps us to focus on the right things and how we can each set our own objectives. Through Aspire, we are all encouraged to focus on the future – there aren’t any performance ratings, and performance is discussed continuously through regular check-ins and reflections.”

#### How Amey’s Headstarters determine their own learning journey

Building on the success of the Government’s Kickstart initiative, Amey launched its own version of the programme to help get people from hard-to-reach areas into the world of work and engage in upskilling. Headstart, which launched in May 2023, is a 6-month programme aimed at young people aged 16-28. Jobseekers are brought into the business via Amey’s relationships with local branches of Jobcentre Plus and are upskilled through a combination of pre-defined virtual learning modules and on-the-job training which is driven by the individual.

“Every Headstarter is expected to complete four online modules during the six-month programme,” explains Charlotte Jones, L&D People Partner at Amey. “The four modules concentrate on boosting the individual’s employability skills, so they cover things like CV writing and interview skills, how to measure and talk about your essential skills, how to set objectives and the different roles available at Amey and within the broader industry. We know that it isn’t enough to just provide the learning materials, we have to make them easy to access

too, so we provide every Headstarter with a laptop, and we brief line managers to carve time out of the working day for them to complete the training. We don't want learners just to be running a digital presentation in the background while they 'crack on' with the day job, so we make sure that the training is engaging, using techniques like breakout rooms and interactive polls”.

“Supportive line managers are key to the success of the programme. Every line manager is trained on their responsibilities towards their direct reports and we ask them to have monthly check-ins with their Headstarters, which cover wellbeing as well as performance. But the most interesting part of the programme is the individual participant's role in determining their learning: we're really keen that the training they receive is led by the individual, so although they may have been brought into the business for one role, we spend time trying to understand what the person wants in terms of their career and try to tweak their learning and development to prepare them for the role they really want.”

Although it's early days for the Headstart programme, initial indications are that it's working well. “We've had really positive feedback from everyone involved in the programme to date,” says Charlotte. “It's been such a success that we're looking to expand it, both in terms of the number of Headstarters we take on and where we offer it – it was launched in Scotland, but we have plans to roll it out into England later this year. I think the key to its success is the level of buy-in we've secured across the organisation: because the Kickstart programme was a success, people have been much more open-minded to this one, at every level of the business. When you want to run a programme like this, it can't just be driven from the senior levels – ultimately, it's the people managers who have to buy into it if it's to work.”

### Demonstrating the personal benefits of upskilling

Adults in lower socio-economic groups are twice as likely to not have participated in learning since

leaving full-time education than those in higher socio-economic groups.<sup>x</sup> If an individual hasn't undertaken any formal upskilling for a long time or if their last experience was a negative one, in-work development can seem daunting. Helping employees to see the benefits of upskilling can be important in encouraging voluntary participation.



### How Thames Water sells the benefits of upskilling to employees

As a 24/7 business, Thames Water needs to be able to cover shifts during fluctuating levels of demand for services, for example, flooding emergencies. They are also very aware of the changing nature of work, and the need to prepare for a just transition to Net Zero. As such, there is a clear benefit to upskilling employees to create a multiskilled and agile workforce that can move fluidly between different areas of the business.

Having identified the business benefit of upskilling, Thames Water initially struggled to get much take up among colleagues. Some employees were reluctant to study again, some didn't want additional responsibilities, and others weren't able to travel between different sites. It became obvious that for learning and development to be successful it had to be seen to be desirable by both parties.

The first phase involved communication with colleagues. Thames Water wanted to give employees a clear message that they were committed to investing in them, as well as provide the chance to find out more about the specific

opportunities available to them and how they would help with personal growth, as well as career advancement. Having colleagues engaged, the second phase involved encouraging individuals to take ownership of their own development by applying to participate in one of the upskilling opportunities – fostering pride when they were successful.

Since late 2021, 56 operational colleagues have been supported through an apprenticeship with a further 24 currently on the programme, and 25 Process Technicians have become fully qualified as Mechanical or Electrical Technicians. Thames Water has additionally supported 12 single-skill technicians to become dual qualified, with another 11 still on the programme. Finally, they are supporting the upskilling of 19 ICA technicians to become Level 4 qualified, with 15 still on the programme.

“For some of our colleagues, this has been their first formal learning opportunity since leaving school so the prospect of learning can be daunting”, explains Karima Khandker, Director of Resourcing, Skills and EDI at Thames Water. “It is important that colleagues are supported to see the personal benefits of upskilling and given ownership over their own development. Crucially, we work together to realise benefits for both them and the business.”

### Making time for development

Nearly two-thirds of employees say that lack of time is the biggest obstacle to them learning at work.<sup>xi</sup>



### How Boots protects time for training

Boots is the UK’s leading health and beauty retailer, employing more than 50,000 people across hundreds of roles, from highly qualified, regulated pharmacists to entry-level retail assistants. Lifelong learning is a central tenet of Boots’ responsible business strategy, with senior leaders across the business championing upskilling for morale, retention and growth.

In 2022, Boots launched Learning Takeover, a global, business-wide initiative in support of Learning at Work Week.

“Learning Takeover Week provides a great opportunity to engage the entire workforce all at once, putting upskilling at the front and centre of everyone’s minds,” explains Emma Metcalf, Senior Manager for Talent, Employability and Future Skills. “By running a dedicated programme of activity for a time-limited period, we generate a real buzz, energising colleagues to find out more about the learning that we offer throughout the year”.

One of the main challenges to Learning Takeover Week is time: it’s important that every colleague has the chance to engage in activities during the week, but also that they’re still able to do their ‘day job’. “The key to success is simplicity”, explains Emma. “We make sure that everything is accessible, and that no event is longer than 1.5 hours. Line managers are given as much notice as possible about the different activities so that they can plan for team members’ participation”.

The support of the senior team is invaluable in getting line managers to ‘buy into’ the week. Senior leaders contribute a lot of the content used during Learning Takeover Week, such as videos and blogs, and there is an expectation that they are also present at the week’s events. A lot of effort is put into raising awareness of the benefits of learning for individuals, teams and the business throughout the year so that line managers are fully supportive.

Boots believes that learning is lifelong, whether a team member is just starting out or has been with

the business for many years. It wants team members to feel its commitment to investing in their development by supporting their career and personal aspirations. As Emma explains, “It can sometimes be a challenge to encourage team members to take time out to engage with learning, which is why one of the key messages we wanted to land is that learning comes from many sources and in different forms. While Learning Takeover Week includes a series of isolated learning activities, it also offers a chance to build the links between learning and career development and ultimately the huge range of opportunities with Boots for the future”.

### Next steps for employers

Our Upskilling for All project set out to identify how we could better equip employers to develop their low-skilled employees. Although not all of the case studies in this report are specifically focused on low-skilled employees, they all describe initiatives that can be extended or replicated to ensure those most in need of development can and will benefit.

This report provides a snapshot of recent and/or ongoing activities that have changed the way employees are supported to upskill. None of the

employers that feature claim to have ‘cracked’ development, rather they have identified an issue, recognised the business benefit of addressing it and enjoyed success as a result of their efforts.

The takeaway from this report isn’t that businesses should be trying to do everything at once, but that they should be doing **something**: ask yourself what the problem you need to solve is and start there. Is it attracting talent? Plugging skills gaps? Retaining staff? Diversifying your senior team? Effective learning and development can help you address all these issues and many more.

There is a wealth of information available from BITC to help you on your upskilling journey – whether you’re just getting started or need to know where to go next. BITC’s Advisory team are on hand to support you to implement the recommendations in this report. Our expert advisers can work with you to develop your data strategies, deliver essential skills training for line managers and leaders or conduct reviews of your recruitment and progression policies and processes. Speak to your BITC Relationship Manager or contact [advisory@bitc.org.uk](mailto:advisory@bitc.org.uk) to find out more.



This report has been produced in partnership with [Phoenix Group](#), the UK’s largest long-term savings and retirement business.

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<sup>i</sup> [Social Mobility Commission](#), 2017

<sup>ii</sup> BITC/YouGov, 2023

<sup>iii</sup> [McKinsey](#), 2020

<sup>iv</sup> [CIPD](#), 2021

<sup>v</sup> BITC/YouGov, 2023

<sup>vi</sup> [Learning and Work Institute](#), 2021

<sup>vii</sup> [McKinsey](#), 2023

<sup>viii</sup> [Gartner](#), 2019

<sup>ix</sup> [McKinsey](#), 2017

<sup>x</sup> [Learning and Work Institute](#), 2021

<sup>xi</sup> [Cornerstone](#), 2023