Mind the Gap

Skills Gap

Moderator

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Dr Bas Koene studies human agency and leadership in processes of institutional change and Organizational Development. He is specifically interested in the organization of work and the management of employment. Recent projects focus on the management & organization of non-standard employment, the relation between job quality and innovation (QuInnE project), participation and community (I-WIRE project) and on the role of HR in new ways of organizing work.

As director of the RSM Case Development Centre he has been building support for case development and case method innovation at RSM for over 5 years, strengthening the relevance of case studies as tools for research valorization and learning.

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Here's some background to our discussion of filling the Skills Gap:

There are Skills Gaps in sustainable development in many forms and intensities; in leadership skills, management skills, social skills, literacy skills, navigation skills, negotiation skills, brokering skills, and problem-solving skills.

The SDG agenda has a challenge-based approach that connects skills development with the achievement of medium-term and common goals, most of which are complex and require collaboration. Students, managers, scholars and researchers all need to know the skill of collaboration – but it's not usually part of any mainstream curricula.

SDG4 is the obvious target for addressing the Skills Gap because it aims to ensure inclusive and quality education for all, and the promotion of lifelong learning. It was introduced to create greater access to education, but also to navigate skills development and support educational reform. For example, a fundamental Skills Gap is the 103 million young people around the world who lack basic literacy skills. Dealing with this gap through education has clear spill-over effects. Education reduces inequality, intolerance and conflict, and allows for healthier, more sustainable lives, and better jobs.

Consequently, education and life-long learning are an important way to achieve other SDGs, such as combatting climate change (SDG13) and responsible production and consumption (SDG12). It goes without saying that educated people are also needed to fill the Innovation Gap (SDG9).

SDG4 includes lifelong learning, which implies that formal education alone is not enough to address the Skills Gap. Bear in mind that the traditional hierarchy of higher and lower

education is flawed because both theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge must be developed and applied in close interaction, and changes in the trajectories for filling other gaps require continuous evaluation and learning while doing. These processes cannot be limited to primary, secondary or even tertiary formal education. If the foundational skills of reading, writing, listening, presenting, studying, management, and research are not developed at a sufficiently high level, there will still be serious gaps for addressing the complex challenges that all practitioners face. Holistic approaches to skill development show that foundational skills are best acquired if they are linked to real societal challenges. Challenge-based learning – including life-long learning – and transdisciplinary research can overcome some of these gaps.

What other generic skills are needed to fill the gap? The World Economic Forum has framed this challenge as the development of 21st Century Skills, and compiled the top 10:
1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Active learning and learning strategies
4. Creativity
5. People management
6. Coordination with others
7. Negotiation
8. Resilience
9. Stress tolerance and flexibility
10. Cognitive flexibility

However, it's remarkable that there's little attention to instrumental skills like ICT skills or reproducing skills (useful for surviving multiple choice exams).

When the world is becoming more VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous), the biggest challenge seems to be for students, managers, leaders and future leaders to develop tolerance for ambiguity, to learn to deal with complexity, and to engage others to work together on common purposes by thinking outside of the box for their approaches.

Achieving individual SDGs or combinations of SDGs can be considered a wicked problem that can only be addressed if organisations and leaders implement collaborative approaches. One of the challenges of business schools has been to develop a collaborative mindset amongst their students. Prof. Mette Morsing, who led the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) until 2023, formulated the root causes of this challenge as:

"The critique of business schools has been that they focus on generating a 'me first' attitude amongst those students."

Some specific points for attention:

- **Principles-based education**: navigating challenge-based skill development towards SDGs requires a principles-based approach. For example, the PRME platform links the ambitions of more than 800 business schools around the world and creates a community of like-minded institutes that develop people who will work to help their organisations create inclusive prosperity while promoting freedom, justice, and peace within regenerative and resilient natural ecosystems.
  PRME adopted seven organisational principles to inspire and enable a better world through responsible management practices: purpose; values like accountability and responsibility; teaching and transformative environments; research that inspires responsible management; partnering across sectors; practice; and sharing successes and failures.
- **Specific leadership skills**: the ability to engage in paradoxical thinking to address two apparent opposites and tensions in a creative way; these are related to the challenges of the VUCA world, and require the ability to explore and capture those tensions.
- **Multiple-stakeholder action**: filling the Skills and Knowledge Gaps implies engaging multiple stakeholders to fill some knowledge gaps, testing the actions, and pooling the efforts and means to reach higher degrees of impact. This approach of shaping, inspiring and directing efforts is also known as governing through goals, and it represents the core of the SDG approach.
- **Making it personal**: one of the most tangible initiatives for developing skills for the SDGs has been the initiation of the Inner Development Goals (IDG), which represent a co-creative initiative of 23 supporting organisations. They include academics, experts and collaborating business partners who develop people's inner abilities, skills and qualities to contribute to a more sustainable global society and achieve the SDGs. The initiative aims to educate, inspire and empower people to be a positive force for change in society. The IDG framework is an open-source work in progress. It represents five states: being; thinking; relating; collaborating; and acting, for each of 23 skills and qualities needed to achieve the SDGs and create a prosperous future for all humanity.