SKILL ACQUISITION
FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

A People Matters & Simplilearn Study
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The exponential advancement in technology, penetration of Internet and encroachment of computational power has forced leaders to go back to the drawing board and re-design their business models to deliver better outcomes to customers and stay relevant in the market. In order to improve productivity, optimize costs attached with processes and for accomplishing a better customer experience, going digital is indispensable for organizations. And as this disrupts the ways of working, skilling, re-skilling and upskilling, talent becomes pivotal in setting up businesses for success. Hence, the role of Learning and Development (L&D) function is more critical than ever before in today’s world.

Continuing with our endeavor to provide actionable research for our community, People Matters in partnership with Simplilearn studied how organizations are building competencies and acquiring skillsets for the digital age. This involved understanding L&D priorities in context of digital disruption and automation, how organizations are looking at re-skilling their employees, and how to leverage technology to deliver trainings.

The findings of this study revealed that the most important competencies for the future will be ‘enabling a digital mindset’ and ‘building a culture of collaboration’. Companies will prefer skill acquisition, i.e. to re-train and re-skill current talent rather than acquire new talent laterally, but they will need to be supported by learning methods that are high on speed and low on resources. The L&D function in most organizations will have to mature fast to tackle the challenges posed by digitally disruptive technologies. The methods that they choose to impart skills with will also need to demonstrate an appeal to the end-users by having a valid certification based on a component of assessment. This will help in addressing the major challenge of low course completion percentage which currently characterizes online learning initiatives.

In view of this, the report also features expert perspectives and best practices in the domain shared by the HR Leaders from leading organizations across various sectors. We are grateful to all the participants who took the survey along with the individuals and organizations who contributed their time and expertise in assisting us with this.

Happy Reading!

Esther Martinez  
CEO & Editor-in-Chief, People Matters

Krishna Kumar  
Founder & CEO, Simplilearn
The increasing use of digital technologies and the imminent rise of intelligent technologies, that are forming a big part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, are expected to cause paradigm shifts in the parameters defining employability of human resources, and have also increased the focus on the preparedness of organizations to adopt and adapt to the changes brought by such disruptions.

The parousia of digital and automation has created a stir among employers and employees about the possible reduction in jobs and lack of skills that assist business performance. Organizations are the sum total of their human resources, and a highly skilled workforce has a direct impact on the success of the organization’s business. Hence, the role of an L&D professional has become critical more than ever in face of such challenges.

The *People Matters - Simplilearn L&D Tech Study on Skill Acquisition for the Digital Age* is aimed at exploring the state of L&D function in relation to digital technologies and the inclination of organizations towards online learning methodologies for re-skilling and up-skilling of their employees. The survey saw the participation of L&D professionals from 102 companies across industries and sectors.

The study has focused on three aspects of the L&D function: 1) L&D Strategy: What are L&D priorities in context to digital and automation? Is skill acquisition preferred over talent acquisition? How organizations are establishing a link between L&D initiatives and business outcomes; 2) Delivering Knowledge and Skills: Understanding the best way to deliver training content. The maturity of L&D systems and processes to handle challenges arising due to digital disruption; 3) Training Methods of the Digital Age: The new modes of delivering training to skill, upskill and reskill employees.

The study showcases that while L&D professionals are in the process of becoming mature to imbibe competencies required for the digital age, the most radical shift that has to be brought about is in the employee mindset about analytical thinking and data comprehension that will be the core skills that will drive business efficiency and productivity.
FINDINGS

1. STRATEGIC DECISIONS REGARDING L&D FUNCTIONS

a) Skill acquisition preferred over talent acquisition
Traditionally, it has been believed that skilled talent is in great demand and the supply is far short of expectations. Among the surveyed organizations, more than 60 percent preferred to train and redeploy existing talent, i.e. skill acquisition instead of hiring skilled talent from outside. The advantage of this approach has been seen in saving talent acquisition cost and increasing talent retention. A substantial percentage (28 percent) also felt that they were pressed for time and resources to achieve skill enhancement; and thus, L&D teams need to come up with innovative methods to train employees fast and with minimum resources.

b) L&D needs to prioritize building digital mind-set and benchmarking
In the face of the ongoing digital disruptions and the imminent automation wave, it is evident that reskilling and upskilling are going to be major responsibilities of the L&D teams in the immediate future.

Respondents identified the most important L&D priorities as:
• “Instilling a “digital mind-set at the leadership level” (75 percent); and
• “Benchmarking the current skills level in the organizations which will help in streamlining future job roles” (68 percent).

Clearly, organizations feel that leadership will require imbibing digital technologies in their thought processes and working towards developing skills in their employees to tackle new roles. This also points to a possible gap in awareness between the L&D professionals and the top leadership regarding digital technologies and their impact.

It is interesting to see that new-age sectors such as IT & Communication, BFSI and Telecom attach a greater importance to a culture of collaboration and are willing to invest in L&D initiatives.

Focus on acquiring skills vs. acquiring talent

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We prefer to train and redeploy existing talent and we have enough time or resources to implement this</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We prefer to train and redeploy existing talent but we don’t have enough time or resources to implement it</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater than 20 percent of the project needs are met through lateral hiring as we cannot reskill fast enough</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough evidence to comment/Not applicable</td>
<td>19%</td>
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Top L&D priorities in the context of digital disruption and automation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enable digital mindset at leadership level</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build collaboration as a competency</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark current skills and streamline jobs for future</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify next-gen learning offerings</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design interventions to foster a culture of digital thinking</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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c) Establishing linkage between L&D initiatives and business outcomes continues to be a priority

The most difficult task that any L&D manager faces is to establish a clear link between L&D initiatives and improved business outcomes. Our respondents have indicated that this will continue to be a priority while investing in upskilling employees for digital disruptions.

While a substantial number of respondents (16 percent) do not measure L&D’s ROI, the most common means of reaching a number are: Performance pre- and post-training (38 percent) and qualitative feedback from employee (28 percent).

L&D programs should demonstrate a clear performance enhancement in participants post training and generate positive feedback from employees. Therefore, while designing skill enhancement programs, care needs to be taken while ensuring that these two parameters are clearly measurable.

However ROI alone will not drive up-skilling initiatives. Key challenges for L&D professionals will be getting ‘Executive Buy-in’ and ‘Aligning L&D’ initiatives to the overall strategy of the organization. Even after tackling all these challenges, lack of interest among employees is likely to be a spoiler in upskilling efforts.

d) Business involvement in decision-making is growing

Business teams are emerging as key stakeholders in deciding on domain and technology specific courses to be imparted to employees. This increase of ownership is felt strongly by 44 percent of the organizations covered and marginally by 32 percent. It is a huge positive for the L&D teams that business teams are starting to see value in learning and that the L&D function is evolving from a ‘good-to-have’ mindset to a ‘must-have’ mindset.

The final decision on the key competencies to be developed and the skills to be imparted rest majorly with the CEOs or HR Heads in equal measures, which also supports the above finding that management is increasingly participating in L&D decisions instead of leaving them to the HR leaders.
2. DELIVERING KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS: TRAINING PROCESSES

Once an organization has moved beyond the planning stage on skill enhancement programs, it has to decide on the audience and best mode for delivery of the content.

a) L&D processes and systems need maturity to handle challenges of digital disruption

While most organizations (52 percent) plan their calendars 1 year in advance, the maturity of current practices in being able to handle the demand for upskilling is also crucial. A majority of the respondents (88 percent) felt that their L&D processes and systems still need to mature to handle the new challenges of digital disruption. This represents an opportunity for external partners as they can fill in the gaps with their expertise and become important stakeholders in skilling efforts of organizations.

b) “Willingness to learn” is the key indicator of trainability

All employees are not equally amenable to re-skilling and up-skilling programs and organizations need to identify which employees it should invest time and money on.

The success of training initiatives depend on choosing the right audience and this has been reflected in the responses where 67 percent chose “willingness to learn” as the key indicator of trainability.
TRAINING METHODS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE: ONLINE COURSES & CERTIFICATIONS

a) Current Scenario

The availability of online courses and certifications has increased exponentially in recent times.

Organizations that have incorporated this mode of training feel that it has distinct advantages such as self-paced learning, ease of integration into L&D strategy and processes, and capacity to be updated regularly with the latest content. Online learning has an edge when it comes to acquiring a new skill quickly, because online content can be made available faster than designing a formal classroom training program. In conversation with People Matters, Chetna Munshi, Head L&D of Ericsson India echoed similar sentiments, “One of the advantages that we have observed with online courses is that when there is a time gap between the formal course availability and the business readiness, in such events, online courses or MOOCs are an excellent way to acquire skills in a shorter span of time.”

Most organizations are optimistic about the readiness of employees to imbibe this new method of enhancing their skills and knowledge — as many as 42 percent of respondents felt that more than 70 percent of their workforce can be trained using digital technologies. Currently, organizations are using this mode of learning for roles ranging from Entry level to Middle-management levels, which indicates that the need for skill enhancement is present throughout organizations.

Rachita Sahgal, Head - L&D, GE South Asia, says “We currently have people skilled in mature technologies and need to re-skill them on emerging or nascent technologies”.

Organizations use a variety of methods to encourage learners on their learning journey, most popular being linking certifications and course completion with Rewards & Recognition as well as Career Progression. Most organizations (67 percent), however, do not have a policy of reimbursing employees after successful completion of their courses, which could be a challenge in adoption of this learning mode by employees.

Given the advantages that this medium of learning has over the traditional methods, it would be beneficial for organizations to offer greater incentives to drive its adoption within the workforce.

Why Online/Certification Courses are preferred

- 79% Self-paced learning
- 67% Easy to integrate into L&D strategy and processes
- 62% Updated regularly with latest content
- 48% Validated certifications
- 41% Most effective learning resource

Percentage of completion as against enrollment for online courses/certifications among employees

- 39% Less than 25 percent
- 28% Between 25 to 50 percent
- 19% Between 50-75 percent
- 15% Above 75 percent

Encouraging learners to complete courses

- 39% Rewards & recognition
- 31% Career path: fast track/ promotions
- 17% Gamification of the training program
b) The way forward
The future of online learning as a preferred medium of training depends upon its ability to meet the expectations of organizations on 3 key parameters:

- The course should be appealing to end users;
- It must include a valid certification; and
- It should include a component of assessment.

It is also evident that online learning will be adopted for the newest technologies that are emerging, namely Artificial Intelligence, Machine learning and Big Data & Analytics. These 3 emerging fields have been ranked as the most relevant areas for reskilling and up-skilling by the respondents.

Top 3 attributes to look into online courses

- Has a valid certification: 80%
- Provides a great user experience: 77%
- Has a component of assessment: 74%

Top technology areas where re-skilling need will be highest in next 12-18 months

- Artificial Intelligence: 41%
- Machine Learning: 32%
- Big Data Analytics: 25%
- Mobile & software development: 20%

CONCLUSION

The study provides some key insights to both L&D teams as well as service providers that operate in the L&D ecosystem.

The efficacy of online courses and certifications is currently challenged by low course completion percentages and to overcome this, these programs must be appealing to the end-users and organizations alike. Any online learning initiative that demonstrates a measurable performance enhancement will help L&D teams in establishing a positive ROI for their training efforts.

A majority of employees in organizations at the entry to the mid-level are amenable to online learning, with key indicators of trainability being the willingness to learn and adaptability of the individual. Online learning possesses some inherent advantages as it can be updated regularly with latest content, can be easily integrated with current L&D practices while allowing the learner to pace their progress as per their wishes.

The major demand for skill enhancement will be in areas such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine learning and Big Data-Analytics and online learning initiatives can provide latest content related to these faster than traditional modes of training such as On-The-Job and class-room training. With business teams taking greater interest in learning initiatives in most organizations, the onus is on content providers to demonstrate their ability to partner with L&D teams in handling the challenges of these new technologies.

The most radical shift that has to be brought about is in the employee mindset, starting from the leadership, that analytical thinking and data comprehension will be increasingly important to drive business efficiency and productivity.
Respondents Profile
The Simplilearn-People Matters Survey on “Skill Acquisition for the Digital Age” saw participation from 102 companies. The survey was aimed to evaluate and determine three broad themes:

**Strategic decisions regarding L&D functions**

**Delivering Knowledge & Skills: Training processes**

**Training Methods for the Digital Age: Online courses & Certifications**

### Industry Type

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<tr>
<th>Industry Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT &amp; Communication</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing/Engineering</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking, Financial Service and Insurance</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical/ Medical Devices/ Healthcare Services</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMCG</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate/ Infrastructure</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunication</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail &amp; Wholesale Trade</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>27%</td>
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Skill Acquisition for the Digital Age - A People Matters and Simplilearn Study
For GE, digital is the way forward. Across the world, sensors-embedded in turbines, locomotives, aircraft engines and healthcare equipment, continuously transmit valuable data. GE connects this data to apps, via the Predix platform, facilitating predictive analytics to help industries operate faster, smarter and more efficiently. For this, it is imperative to get our employees digitally-ready to invent and deliver better outcomes for customers. However, one of the challenges we have is to re-skill our workforce to meet the digital demands. We currently have people skilled in mature technologies and need to re-skill them on emerging or nascent technologies.

To address this challenge, our approach is to leverage both skill acquisition as well as talent acquisition. As far as skill acquisition is concerned, we are utilizing an arsenal of delivery modes like MOOCs, podcasts, virtual instructor-led classrooms, videos, besides classroom sessions. Moreover, to make our employees digital ready, we have appointed a learning leader to focus on skill acquisition for a digital workplace.

Given that we are a conglomerate operating in different industry verticals, across multiple functions, there is no single skill that can be relevant to everyone. Yet, data analytics will be increasingly important to drive business efficiency and productivity. With the advent of digital disruption and automation, it will become exceedingly important for employees to be able to connect the digital dots, think critically and provide actionable insights for business impact.

Today, it is crucial for employees to quickly learn, unlearn and re-learn to keep pace with the ongoing digital disruption. To enable this, L&D professionals must look at how they can embrace innovative L&D solutions and strategies to engage employees in learning, and demonstrate the business impact. As L&D professionals, we need to imbibe agile thinking with regard to solutions in order to make the critical shifts in the behavior and skills of employees.
It is indispensable for Ericsson to upskill employees on the emerging technologies as fast pace changes in technology are continuously transforming the regular ways in which we perform a job. In an increasingly dynamic market, skilling employees for digital pose a major challenge. Within every few months there is a new trend in the market that requires employees to acquire new skills equally fast.

To keep pace with the dynamics of the market, organizations need to keep a tab on what has changed in the market and how they are planning to use or not use the new technology or trend caused due to disruption. Today the telecom market is leaving no stone unturned to shift towards more efficient and capable networks for e.g. enabling 5G applications. These developments will require skilling employees in virtualization, IoT, and Cloud to name a few.

To get the better of this demand, our domain experts regularly benchmark ongoing processes with the current trends, understand the gaps and then realize the competencies required to adopt those trends. We leverage a combination of delivery mediums like classroom training, virtual training, online courses, videos, gamification etc. Additionally, we own a vast library of online courses that employees can use as per their requirement.

In order to build capabilities for digital, L&D foremost needs to have an outside-in view as well. Till now, the L&D function has been inward-focused i.e. the professional concern is developing the capability of the employees basis the current requirements. However, the current scenario requires being outward-focused as well. They need to understand the changing business requirements and come up with timely solutions which are cost efficient as well as effective. With the advent of digital and automation, L&D professionals need to curate rather than just create courses from the scratch. They need to curate resources to interest and guide people to learn more, just in time and better.

One of the advantages that we have observed with online courses is that there are events when there is a time gap between the formal course availability and the business readiness. In those events, online courses are an excellent way to acquire skills in a shorter span of time.
LEARNING AGILITY FOR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
To be able to adapt to an increasingly volatile environment, it is critically important for employees to focus on their learning agility and overall business acumen.

An increasing percentage of the jobs currently in existence are facing obsolescence thanks to technological advances such as Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. Any job that involves a relatively lower degree of social interaction and creativity is at the risk of becoming obsolete.

At Piramal, we are looking for more “generalist” managers with greater learning agility. We use blended learning in all of our learning interventions and have now migrated from standalone traditional training programs. Peer learning and reflection is a significant chunk of our learning journeys. In some of our learning interventions, we use gamification and peer/group learning.

Experiential learning environments and the “flipped classroom” (theory outside of the classroom; practice, peer learning and reflection within the classroom) have helped us immensely in leadership development.

Our young high potentials mentor our seasoned leaders and vice versa through an innovative two-way collaborative mentoring program called “Piramal Konnect” to make sure our leaders are social media savvy and future-ready. Our leadership journeys are also built around developing greater self-awareness, social and emotional intelligence. We spot our high potentials using a structured process that assesses learning agility as a key input.

To keep pace with digitization, I believe tech skills and digital savviness are two skills required to make sure the organization embraces the future. Social and emotional intelligence is indispensable to survive and thrive in a world of increased collaboration and partnerships. Hard skills such as social media management, design thinking etc. are also taking greater relevance.

In this new era of digitization, the role of the learning function is no longer to create content but to curate the right content, “just in time”, “just enough” and “just for each individual learner”.

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In this new era of digitization, the role of the learning function is no longer to create content but to curate the right content, “just in time”, “just enough” and “just for each individual learner”. The ability to create bite-size learning paths that can be consumed on the go, and the ability to integrate learning into everyday work are other important skills. Learning can no longer be outside of work, instead, it has to be embedded into work.
BUILDING COMPETENCIES FOR TOMORROW
Making learning accessible at any place and at any time results in both employee and organizational development

Learning has to be constant and should be focused on acquisition of competencies which drive business in the digital era like Business Acumen, Analytical Ability, etc.

The telecom sector continues to witness disruption which hasn’t been seen ever before. The arrival of Internet of Things (IoT), better connectivity and digitization has already started impacting the subtleties of the market. And this has placed a lot of pressure on organizations to build capabilities for tomorrow and to link learning to business performance.

To prepare our workforce to be future ready, we want to instill a millennial and entrepreneurial mindset in our people. Also, the dwindling attention span, paucity of time, etc. are few of the biggest hurdles that organizations have to overcome while creating training that resonates with business requirements and be useful in employees’ development. To solve such challenges, we centered our focus on encouraging employees to take charge of their learning.

We adopted numerous ways to make learning fun and easy to access. We are moving from conventional classroom training to a more live, simulation-based learning.

In the last one year, we have extensively leveraged Gamification as a means of acquiring competencies that resonate with our business needs. We are doing a lot of interventions by adopting various technologies like social platforms, e-learning portals, MOOCs, webinars, providing magazines, research papers, articles, videos, etc. at a click. MOOCs, short online courses, and e-learning are one of the excellent mediums to create byte sized learning that is readily available and quick to learn. But a word of caution here is that such options at best can be a substitute but not be a replacement for an eye-to-eye contact.

For e.g. a Negotiation Skills training should have a practicum rather than merely sensitizing oneself through MOOCs or e-learning. Both MOOCs and e-learning courses can add excellent value in cementing the learnings if they are used as a Pre or Post training exercises. So we would say that the best approach is to integrate and blend.

With the digital era, building competencies for tomorrow is a strategic priority for any organization. As Learning and Development (L&D) professionals, we need to keep ourselves abreast with the latest trends and technologies to approach skill development. We need to be aware of various delivery vehicles and know the elements that are needed to curate learning in a cost-effective manner. Today, there is a need to adopt blended learning that maximizes the use of different delivery platforms and that makes learning a continual process.

Amidst the evolving needs and skill building approaches, the L&D function needs to have an outward focus and understand the business, its requirements and challenges.

Skill Acquisition for the Digital Age - A People Matters and Simplilearn Study
Technology impacts every aspect of our personal lives – right from the way we consume news on-the-go to how we commute, connect with friends and family, or even complete our daily chores (think groceries, bill payments)... there’s a digital solution for almost everything! It is the accelerated adoption of similar technologies at the workplace that is making waves right now. We have been committed consumers of this digital environment for a while now and this extension of the familiar experience is more of a continuum than a surprise.

Organizations today are using digital in a big way, and that’s changing the way we work. Increasingly, as digital solutions take care of the rule-based transactional work, employees will move on to higher value-adding jobs. Hence, it becomes imperative for employees to not just re-skill themselves on technology solutions but also adopt a digital mindset, which includes being receptive to the changes owing to the impact of digital. The three skills (and not necessarily in that order) that will help people succeed in these times of rapid change are:

- Deep domain expertise, process knowledge or subject specialization will continue to be relevant. It is essential we learn how digital is evolving functions and accelerating change. Our ability to use deep domain expertise to identify opportunities of automation and build capability to use it as an integrated approach to design, transform and run these functional areas is important.

- Curiosity or the willingness to imagine new things, explore uncharted areas, deal with ambiguity and adapt to new situations by asking questions and challenging status quo.

- Collaboration or the ability to connect and empathize with workforces across the world, keeping in mind global and cultural nuances to use the power of collective intelligence.

We believe in not only investing continually in our people development for the current role but continuously challenge the learning status quo and predict the skills required for future.

How we are gearing up for the future at Genpact

People are at the core of our business strategy and talent development has a crucial role to play in sustaining our competitive advantage. This includes substantial investment in developing leaders for tomorrow through an array of technical and professional skill development programs. Going hand in hand with this is our continuous challenge of the status quo and prediction of the skills required for the future. In building this inventory of skills in our talent pipeline, we are incorporating elements of the current digital landscape as a core component of all our leadership training programs.

Keeping in mind that one size doesn’t fit all in learning, we have adopted a blended approach – online, video-based courses, collaborative social learning, and digital libraries. All of which is on-demand. We encourage peer-to-peer learning through our knowledge sharing portal, GSocial where employees come together and share their knowledge, expertise, and ideas. We also partner with various MOOCs, learning content providers and research organizations as we gather momentum on the highway to the future.

The learning professional of the future

We have a seat at the table and it’s a fantastic time for learning professionals as we navigate through such windfalls of change. L&D teams are no longer event managers – they are creating end-to-end learning experiences for employees. It is, therefore, important that they possess strong business acumen, think strategically, are comfortable with technology and go beyond being instructors to being coaches or mentors. The L&D professional of the future is a catalyst for change and is capable of creating a lasting impact on the employees’ and company’s performance. Last but not the least, is the L&D professional’s need to be curious and collaborative – that’s how they will add more value to business.