

WORLD GOVERNMENT SUMMIT

OP-ED

Closing the digital divide is one of the great challenges of our time, and also one of the great opportunities

Jeff Maggioncalda,
CEO of Coursera





As technology continues to reshape the global economy, digital dexterity – both in how we learn and how we work – is becoming increasingly vital for driving opportunities and promoting equity. To stay competitive in this rapidly changing landscape, it is crucial that we use technology to reskill and upskill the workforce, making education more accessible and career-relevant. However, to make meaningful progress, we must also focus on narrowing the digital divide and fostering digital inclusion in both learning and work.

As industries increasingly adopt artificial intelligence, automation, and robotics, the nature of work is becoming increasingly flexible and skills-based – and yet, the lack of workforce readiness is cited as a top barrier to becoming a successful digital business.

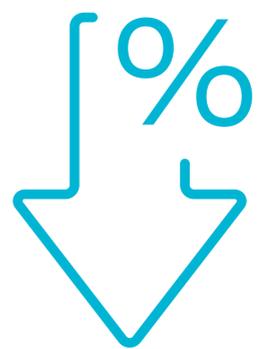
The shortage of talent available to enable digital transformation is a clear indication that traditional learning pathways are not adequately preparing the youth for tomorrow's workplace.



The disconnect between education and the skills required in the professional world has significant social and economic consequences.

G20 economies could lose up to \$11.5 trillion in cumulative GDP growth over the next decade

if the skills gap is not addressed.



This highlights the urgent need to align education with industry and to adopt new approaches to learning.

With so much on the line, and as the digital divide continues to widen, it is imperative that action is taken now to close the gap and prepare individuals for jobs of the future. To achieve this, we must be willing to embrace new methods and technologies in education, foster stronger partnerships and collaborations, and adopt a more progressive mindset.



To better prepare students for the workforce, academic institutions must update their curricula to focus on skill-based learning and offer industry-recognized qualifications. This will give students a greater chance of securing well-paid employment and long-term career success. Additionally, universities will benefit from this shift by attracting an increasingly discerning student body, who prioritize post-graduate employability far more than previous generations have.



The United Arab Emirates has already taken a decisive step in tackling this problem; last year it overhauled its educational system and established new institutions to ensure that its students are equipped with the skills necessary to secure jobs in the modern economy.



Organizations and businesses are already demonstrating their willingness to adapt to the digital economy.

The Future of Jobs Report 2020 indicates that a large majority of employers

84% are rapidly digitizing their operations,

including expanding remote workforces as well as offering employees access to reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

In fact, it is estimated that by 2025, the average company will provide remote learning opportunities to around 70% of employees.

At a national level, cross-sector collaboration is critical to address the scope and size of the skills gap. Governments, businesses, and academic institutions must align efforts and work together to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for entire populations.





In Saudi Arabia, the National eLearning Platform, FutureX, is a great example of successful cross-sector collaboration.

Launched by the National eLearning Center (NELC), the initiative partners with private education providers, such as Coursera, to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for students, professionals, and job seekers across the Kingdom.

This initiative is one of numerous projects that supports Saudi Arabia's ambitious long-term Vision 2030 and the Human Capability Development Program, **which aims to increase equal access to education, build a lifelong learning journey, and align educational outputs with labor market needs. To date, more than 9 million people have benefited from the program.**



Against the backdrop of the global digital skills challenge, democratizing online education is essential for fostering a culture of ongoing learning and personal growth. Governments in the Middle East have looked to online learning as a way to fuel their digital transformation efforts and build a competitive, digitally-skilled workforce that can drive greater economic and social growth.



The UAE, for example, has taken significant steps to prepare its government employees for the future, launching online learning initiatives like Jahiz and the TDRA Virtual Academy.

These platforms are designed to equip employees with the digital skills needed to remain competitive in an increasingly talent-driven economy. The UAE is also investing heavily in a range of sectors, such as AI, space technology, robotics, renewable energy, and health, to foster innovation and promote lifelong learning.

This investment could prove vital in the coming years as a

USD 8.5 billion

global talent shortage is predicted by 2030.



With such widely available, accessible, and affordable forms of education, there is no better time to close the digital skills gap. Those who take advantage of this opportunity now will go on to reap the rewards of a more equitable and prosperous economy.



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