

How to Spot Early Warning Signs of a Skills Gap in Your Workforce

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The meaning of a skills gap has changed over the years. It used to center on technical skills employees needed to develop. With the rise of AI, it now includes how people adjust to technology, their behavioral skills, their willingness to try new approaches, and many other factors that are harder to spot. That creates a challenge because research in psychology shows that patterns begin long before a person's results start to slip. The key is to watch for early signals that show where people need support so leaders can step in before the gap becomes a real issue.

What Are The Early Signs That A Skills Gap Is Developing?

One early sign of a problem is hesitation when expectations at work change. A task that used to feel routine suddenly becomes more complicated if knowledge about new technology is required. Someone who has always been reliable might begin to slow down because they feel overwhelmed or doubt that the new process fits their strengths. It is normal to hesitate when expectations shift because people want to feel capable. When a change raises questions about their ability, they pause because they want to avoid mistakes.

Another sign is a drop in curiosity, which can include fewer questions or fewer solutions offered. That often shows that people have lost confidence. When curiosity fades, it suggests that employees feel unsure about speaking up. They worry that asking questions will highlight what they do not yet know. Those behaviors appear long before any performance issue becomes visible.

You might also notice continued reliance on old methods even when better tools are available. This is common during technology transitions. A person keeps using the process they trust because it feels safer than trying something unfamiliar. The work is completed, but the skills needed for the future are not developing.

How Does Communication Change When A Skills Gap Is Forming?

Communication often becomes more transactional. People stick to short updates and direct instructions instead of exploring ideas. They try to avoid misunderstanding because they already feel stretched. This shift usually signals that they are managing uncertainty by keeping conversations simple.

You might also see frustration surface more quickly. A workflow adjustment or software update that would have been easy months ago now feels harder. Psychology research shows that when people are managing a heavier cognitive load, their patience decreases. The irritation is a sign that their mental bandwidth is being pushed too far.

Avoidance is another pattern. Someone might skip training or delay a task involving a new tool. That avoidance often reflects fear of being judged. It becomes a way to escape a situation that feels risky or uncomfortable.

Why Does A Skills Gap Start Before Metrics Show A Decline?

Metrics measure output, not confidence or readiness. A person can maintain performance without expanding their skills by working longer, relying on familiar routines, or narrowing their responsibilities. Everything looks fine until the next major change arrives. Companies track results, yet they rarely track the behaviors that predict those results. I have worked with organizations that measure the factors that influence curiosity and correlate those findings with engagement, learning, and innovation. When those relationships become clear, it becomes easier to identify the early stages of a skills gap.

Organizations also tend to measure accuracy, speed, and volume. They rarely measure adaptability even though it heavily influences how well someone adjusts to new demands. When adaptability declines, the skills gap begins to grow. The numbers do not reveal it until a new challenge exposes the gap. When I spoke with Ross Thornley and Mike Raven, the cofounders of AQai, about their research on adaptability, they said the biggest challenge inside organizations is not the technology but how people respond when expectations shift. The good news is that adaptability can be strengthened.

Uncertainty is another important psychological factor because it drains mental energy. When people lack clarity about new expectations, they create explanations that lean toward doubt. When I spoke with Larry Robertson, author of *Rebel Leadership*, he explained that uncertainty is a constant part of work. The problem is that leaders often overlook that reality and focus on near-term results, which creates a blind spot. Larry described how people protect themselves from uncertainty by narrowing their thinking and relying on familiar routines, which can create skill gaps.

How Can Leaders Detect A Skills Gap Early And Support Their Teams?

Leaders can start by asking simple questions when someone hesitates. A brief conversation can reveal whether a person needs clarity, reassurance, or hands-on practice. When leaders approach these conversations with genuine curiosity, employees are more open about what feels difficult.

Encouraging employees to repeat back what they heard can help. This allows leaders to catch misunderstandings before they turn into bigger problems. It also builds confidence because people know they are moving in the right direction.

Creating time for low-pressure practice is another helpful step. People learn faster when they can try new skills without immediate expectations. Practice builds confidence, and confidence reduces the fear that makes learning harder.

Listening closely to how people talk about their work can also reveal early signs of a skills gap. Frustration often signals overload, and avoiding conversations about new tools usually reflects uncertainty about how to use them. When someone asks for examples or context, it shows they are still engaged and trying to understand how to move forward.

Why Does Spotting A Skills Gap Early Protect Your Workforce?

A skills gap begins when people hesitate to try something new or stop asking the kinds of questions that once came naturally. Those shifts are easy to miss, but they matter. Leaders who pay attention can offer support before work slows down or confidence drops. Organizations help when learning is treated as part of the job and when effort is noticed, even when the person is still getting comfortable with a new process. When employees feel informed and supported, they are more willing to learn, adapt, and take on what comes next. That stronger sense of direction benefits both the individual and the organization.