



Brandon Hall Group™

**EXCELLENCE  
AT WORK**

# Executive Interview

with **Sarah Danzl**,  
Chief Marketing Officer  
Skillable

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Why Hands-On Learning Is the Solution to Developing  
the Most Critical Skills for the Years Ahead

## About Skillable

A four-time Inc. 5000 company, [Skillable](#) believes validated learning experiences will transform the way organizations upskill their customers, partners and employees. Industry leaders such as Microsoft, Amazon, IBM, Veritas and Skillsoft trust Skillable to deliver hands-on learning experiences at scale. Skillable has delivered on that promise by supporting more than one million new learners in 2022 and 25 million learning experiences in its tenure.

## Recognition

A Brandon Hall Group™ Gold Preferred Provider®, Skillable earned a Bronze Award for Best in Education Delivered Through Technology in the 2022 Brandon Hall Group HCM Excellence Awards®.

### EXCELLENCE IN TECHNOLOGY AWARDS



Learning and Development

1 Bronze Award

The Brandon Hall Group™ Preferred Provider Program is specifically designed as a single source of truth that can validate your technology selection decisions.

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## About Sarah Danzl



**Sarah Danzl** serves as Chief Marketing Officer, focused on the global marketing and go-to-market strategies for Skillable. Most recently, Sarah was Communications Officer and Vice President of Customer Marketing at Degreed. She has been actively involved in the Learning space for 15 years, leading marketing and communications efforts in both corporate and startup capacities, especially thriving in high-growth SaaS environments.

When Sarah is not developing new content, she can be found experimenting with new recipes, getting involved in a local nonprofit or walking her two pit bulls at the base of the Rockies in Boulder, CO.



## About Rachel Cooke

**Rachel Cooke** is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the

Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

**Q** **RACHEL**

What stands out the most for you after all these years in the Learning industry?

**A** **SARAH**

We spend so much time and so much money on learning and on training, but we don't often know the outcomes. I saw a statistic that in 2022, \$101 billion was spent on Learning and Development and training across the globe and yet we see that statistic paired with still many, many global talent shortages, as well as people inside of organizations saying that they don't have the skill mastery they need to do their jobs.

What I'm focused on is how we continue to use skills as the metric for what people are capable of, and leveling the playing field for hiring, job progression and all of those things. We're still trying to figure out how organizations can leverage skills a little bit better across the landscape.

**Q** **RACHEL**

What are some of the considerations or big things that we need to think about learning, and what are some of the little things that we can deconstruct to make it more accessible and achievable?

**A** **SARAH**

Even informal learning has taken a rise in the last few years here, with the importance of always-on learning and being in the flow of life or the flow of work when you're presenting learning. But one of the missteps is this idea that we can just give someone an article or make them watch a video and expect them to be job-ready.

With some of the more blue-collar roles that take a hands-on approach, like plumbing or electricity, they are using their hands-on learning every day and you know pretty quickly if they're job-ready — the lights are either on or off. The plumbing either works or it doesn't. Skillable is out to show that the need to actually validate performance is something that's often missed. Skillable's very lucky to be not only talking to but have many customers on the Fortune 500 and even 2000 that are validating this need as well. Despite all the articles, courses, even shorter experiences, the rise of open online courses and MOOCs, and asking how we can make better learning experiences, they're missing this skill mastery and job-readiness aspect.

Skillable is hoping to bring hands-on learning into the ecosystem, and from there, get that proof people are job-ready and have the skills that they need. I often refer to a quote from Brandon Hall Group's Claude Werder, that one of the things that many ecosystems and learning programs are missing is looking at outcomes. We put the content in front of them, they check the box or they report on how many learning hours the team took, but we don't actually know if they've learned anything, if they've attained a new skill or what level they're at.

*(continued)*

Skillable is working toward bringing that into the ecosystem so that you've got a performance-based metric — they can or cannot do the job — and then the skill validation data for the organization, “Hey, this person is great and they're job-ready,” or, “Hey, there are some gaps right here.” We can target learning to that specific need, instead of making everyone take a course that they don't need. You can see the levels of mastery and who might need what, which in turn, creates smarter investment decisions and capitalizes on investment and finance. We are all worried about that right now, so it's nice to have that two-pronged approach.

### Q RACHEL

Depending on where they are in their career, would you incorporate some level of assessment to determine if they need to continue more development to improve their skills, or if they've already achieved a certain level of skills, that they can move on to a different kind of path? Is that kind of the goal in mind here?

### A SARAH

I think it's both. With the talent shortages and all of the incredible technology that's out there,

the truth is there are not enough cybersecurity experts to fill the need. There are not enough experts in OpenAI, ChatGPT, cloud, AWS, or whatever it might be, which means organizations have to build that talent, they can't buy it. When we think about the need to develop those skills quickly, an assessment is a great way to go pre- and post-job.

For example, if you're hiring someone, you can see if they can actually do the job you want to hire them for. We've also seen a lot of talent moving around an organization, thanks to reskilling and upskilling. There are gaps in other parts of the business that might be able to be accomplished by someone who has those skills in another part.

The issue with a lot of assessments is that they're just simply a check — answer a few questions that are stagnant. They're not custom to the person, they're not custom to the environment, they're not scalable. It doesn't show that you are job-ready, which is I think why a hands-on model takes it a little bit further than the current assessment model. However, assessments are still an important validation of skills.

### Q RACHEL

You mentioned hands-on; can you paint a picture of what that means?

**A SARAH**

For example, you put pilots through all sorts of hours. They're flying in all sorts of scenarios — in the dark at night, in bad weather, through a storm. This is all part of their live training because they have to be able to be job-ready to fly 400 people to a new destination. If your IT team is 3,000 people big and you need to upskill everyone, it's not scalable to fly everybody to a hub, train them all for a few days and then fly them back.

Skillable is taking a little bit of a different approach and making something that's a little bit more scalable, and it's through these virtual labs. It's scalable and customizable to your organization, to your environment and to the job role that you are in, so that it can be given to anyone and quickly. You get a very quick picture of their skill capabilities and can pinpoint them over time.

**Q RACHEL**

How long does it take you to create that type of use case where it is customizable to their job or specific to their organization or function?

**A SARAH**

Skillable is what we like to call a holistic solution because every organization is in a very different place on its journey. We are offering ranges. We have an out-of-the-box library of challenge labs on today's key digital software and IT topics that are ready to go. So, if you need a quick solution, we've got 1,100 and it grows all the time — that's something you can do quickly.

For many of our organizations though, it's kind of a combination of both. Whether they want to take an existing lab that we have and modify it or they need something entirely custom — perhaps they have proprietary technology or a proprietary tool that they want to build hands-on learning around — we have that, too.

And then we have an absolutely world-class services organization. If you need some help with that or if you want to run an event — some of our customers run these large upskilling events — we try to meet you on your journey, wherever you might be.

**Q RACHEL**

How is AI or some of these other disruptive technologies impacting you?

**SARAH**

**A** We have taken the road of embracing it. We believe that it can help. I've heard a lot of dialogue around, "Oh, ChatGPT is going to replace instructional designers," for example. We believe the opposite. I believe that inside of this, ChatGPT can be a really good addition and help with the content that you're delivering. You can move quicker and get a baseline of content ready to go.

But you still need the person for customizations and things like that. When you think about the human, it switches to a conversation about being able to be a coach and mentor. You can let AI do the basic work, but that doesn't eliminate the critical thinking and the quick evolutions that are needed. The human elements of trying, of failing, of going again, and the creative solutions, are still needed.

We have spent a fair amount of time exploring AI for marketing, and while it's good and a very helpful tool, it often needs massaging before the final draft. It needs that human element. It comes out a bit generic, a little bit stagnant, and the same goes for how training can be. You still need that human message to make it relevant to the group and relevant to the person, so we have made the decision to embrace it as part of our tool.

You can sit with Google on one screen or ChatGPT open on one screen while taking your assessment on the other. You can very quickly answer even short-form questions, but it is not reflective of your knowledge. If someone else is writing it for you, you have no idea what that person's capable of. It might've been a great answer, but it might've been open-API-fueled. That's another thing that Skillable is looking at why hands-on learning is so important. ChatGPT is not going to be able to defend you against a multi-billion-dollar attack on your financial portfolio. Reiterating that the actual behaviors are what hands-on learning helps you see, is the outcome.

**RACHEL**

**Q** Is there anything else that you want to share?

**SARAH**

**A** I want to challenge folks in the industry right now to think about hiring biases and diversity initiatives. When we think about people as a collection of skills, there are so many more possibilities for our folks, and that opens up possibilities inside our organizations.

*(continued)*

When you look at someone as a collection of job titles, or where they're from, and even in referrals by the way, it's probably someone like you. It continues to mitigate some of those biases when we look at people as a collection of skills instead, including in the hiring process.

We can expand the talent pool by letting people try and apply, especially for folks that may not be good at thinking on their feet, or may not have good eye contact, or things like that. Inherently, sometimes neurodiverse people aren't good at those. So, when we think about the power of skills and what's to come, I just encourage us to think about using that as our baseline for a lot of things inside the organization. We'll continue to get better and continue to evolve as an industry and as organizations when we do so.

**Here are some ways to listen to the interview on Brandon Hall Group's Excellence at Work Podcast:**



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# About Brandon Hall Group™

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 30 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group™ is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

## Professional Certifications

Self-paced certification programs. Virtual group sessions for companies. In-person conferences and summits.

## Membership

Individual and Enterprise Membership Options: Includes research assets, advisory support, a client success plan and more.

**SOME WAYS WE CAN HELP**

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Three annual programs recognize the best organizations that have successfully deployed programs to achieve measurable results.

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### ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

recognizes world-class HCM programs that transform their organization and achieve breakthrough results. This designation is the next step beyond the HCM Excellence Awards, which focus on a single program, and looks at the department as a whole.



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uniquely places HCM service and technology companies at the top of organizations' consideration list of vendors. It adds an unmatched level of credibility based on BHG's twenty-eight-plus years of experience in evaluating and selecting the best solution providers for leading organizations around the world.