



Executive Interview



Why Skills Have to Be Learned

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About Skillsoft



Skillsoft is a global leader in AI-native skills management for the human + AI era. By unifying learning, real-time skills intelligence, and workforce insights, Skillsoft helps enterprises build their Skillforce™, with humans and AI working together to drive measurable business outcomes. Through personalized, interactive learning across leadership, technology and compliance, Skillsoft enables organizations to close critical skill gaps and accelerate transformation. Skillsoft is trusted by thousands of organizations worldwide and supports a global community of more than 105 million learners.

About Bernie Barbour



Bernie Barbour is Chief Technology and Product Officer at Skillsoft, where he leads the continued evolution of the Percipio platform as a unified skills management system. He joined Skillsoft in January 2026 and reports to CEO Ron Hovsepian. Barbour has a strong record of building and scaling engineering, AI, data and product teams. He most recently served as Chief Technology Officer at Indigo Agriculture, where he led modernization efforts that improved core platforms and strengthened data capabilities.

About David Wentworth



Today's conversation is moderated by **David Wentworth**, Managing Director of Learning and Talent at Brandon Hall Group™. He brings nearly two decades of experience conducting research, interviews and data analysis in the learning and talent space. David originally joined Brandon Hall Group™ in 2012 as a Principal Analyst, establishing himself as one of the industry's foremost authorities on learning and development before departing to serve as VP and Talent Platform Evangelist at Schoox. Prior to Brandon Hall Group™, he served as a senior analyst at the Institute for Corporate Productivity. In his current role, David works with technology providers and enterprise organizations to understand learning and talent challenges and what it takes to overcome them. He is a podcast host, a regular speaker at industry events and has authored numerous articles across HCM and learning publications.

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Skills and Learning Are Having Their Biggest Moment Since the Cloud

Q David

What is your read on the current conversation around skills and capability?

A Bernie

We are at a moment in history where, with all of the technology change and the disruption AI is causing, skills and learning are having a moment they probably haven't seen since the evolution of cloud and, before that, the internet. This is a peak moment for learning and skills development, and it is easy to get lost chasing the next shiny thing. We're going to build agents. We're going to deploy AI. That is definitely changing the conversation, and it is an interesting time to be part of it.

Fragile Proxies

Only about one in 10 organizations use formal skills assessments. The rest rely on manager judgment, self-ratings and relationships.

Q David

When organizations say they have endless data on skills, what do they really have?

Real Skills Data Reflects What You Can Demonstrate

A Bernie

Lots of people have lots of data, and that problem has existed for a while. The data is scattered and unstructured, sitting in performance reviews, HR systems and promotion history. Some of it is self-reported, where people claim skills, which is what can be called claimed skills.

Even that is more than many organizations have. We published a workforce readiness report that showed about one in 10 organizations use formal skills assessments. The rest lean on manager judgment, self-ratings and relationships, which are fragile proxies for what people can do.

There is plenty of data and activity out there but very little measurement of capability, and very little measurement of proficiency. Saying you know how to program because you took a course is great, but are you really good at it? Can you deliver at the level the organization needs? Real skills data reflects what you can demonstrate and the proficiency level you have reached, along with what you claim.

So the foundation of lots of data does exist. What matters is whether that data is usable and deployable enough to execute against a plan. That is where it gets more interesting, and it is what we classify as earned skills versus claimed skills.

Assessment Meets Experience

Rate people on the skills they have, then look at how they've shown those skills through experience to understand their true proficiency.

Q David

Why do so many companies struggle to define proficiency levels?

A Bernie

There is also tacit knowledge that lives in the data. Skills involve more than assessments and performance reviews. Assessments are absolutely critical to validate skills, but skills also include experience and exposure. Are you delivering projects on time? Are you

A Skill Isn't Real Until It Shows Up In the Work

seeing good results? A great performance evaluation can reflect a lot of extraneous factors, whereas the experience you demonstrate over a period of time builds confidence in addition to what is assessed in other ways.

Assessment and proficiency go hand in hand. You rate someone on the skills they have, and then you look at how they have demonstrated those skills through experience to understand how proficient they are at a particular level.

Software is an easy example. Engineers are great, but not all engineers are architects, and getting people to think like architects is what you want. CFOs are another. We spoke with a big customer that was looking for CFOs because they were building data centers. The CFO they needed for that project was someone who could raise funds, as opposed to an operational or FP&A type of CFO. That shows up in a person's history and experience, and not only in the learning trajectory they have followed.

Q David

Why do learning teams keep defaulting to completion rates and smile sheets?

A Bernie

That is absolutely on the mark for what learning outcomes have been expected to be, today and even yesterday. It has been about completion, attendance and assessment, and you check the box. Turning that into something far more actionable means thinking about the outcomes you are trying to achieve with the learning.

We spoke with someone new to the role of chief learning officer who met with the CEO. The CEO asked what he was going to do

Tie Learning to Outcomes

Legacy metrics focused on retention, career pathing and growth. Today learning has to connect to revenue, cost and risk.

Start With What the Business Needs to Achieve

for the company, and he said he was going to train people. The CEO effectively responded, “Great, but then what? What does it mean for our organization if we train people?” A lot of the time the legacy metric has been retention, career pathing and growth. Today it needs to tie to the business outcome, which means revenue, cost and risk. That changes the game from what learning was to what skills is and will be. It is the pivot point we are in right now. Those conversations are starting to happen, though not at the rate we would like.

Another way to look at it is that a skill isn’t real until it shows up in the work. Personal growth matters, but from an organizational perspective we need to put skills to work. Otherwise they remain a learning activity and never become mission critical.

Q David

What has to exist around learning to point toward what comes next and make skills real?

A Bernie

It starts with the first question we ask, which is about what the business needs to achieve and whether we are ready to deliver it, rather than what we have to train. That is an outcome-first system and mindset, and it differs from a one-time project or the classic compliance training everyone takes once a year before moving on. Lots of organizations know what they need to build or achieve as a business outcome. They don’t always know which skills they have.

The system we put around this is what we call the skills supply chain, a skills management life cycle framework. It begins with business outcomes and connects them to an execution plan. If you are going to grow revenue 15% to 20%, what are the steps to get there, and do you have the skills to execute that plan? Those could be human skills, agents or any of the different ways to deliver.

The Skills Supply Chain

A closed loop that identifies the outcome, identifies the need, closes the gap and measures whether it moved the needle.

Measure Skills With the Same Rigor as Revenue, Cost and Risk

That is where skills and readiness come in, in a closed loop. Here is the gap we identified to execute the plan. How do we close it? Most important, how do we ensure we deploy those skills in the work and then measure whether they moved the needle? You need the full life cycle to identify the outcome, identify the need, close the gap and then measure. That is what we call the skills supply chain in our work.

Q David

How do organizations keep from dropping the ball on the last step, which is applying the capability?

A Bernie

It goes beyond developing the skills. You have to measure the results. You may close the skills gap by building, borrowing, automating or hiring. When you close the gap, deploy the skill to the work you are trying to achieve and measure it, that is when it becomes more of a discipline and a mission-critical system. You are measuring with the same rigor as revenue, cost and risk, because that is exactly what you are measuring as the outcome.

The Knowledge Cliff

Repeating what AI generates doesn't build domain expertise or judgment, the one element of skill AI still can't deliver.

Q David

How do leaders know people are actually more capable with AI and not abdicating their role to a tool?

A Bernie

I view this in a couple of different ways. As AI changes the world, we need to be sure we are validating, assessing and verifying skills. There is a knowledge cliff I refer to. If someone stays shallow and

AI On Its Own Won't Do It

repeats whatever AI generates for them, they are not building domain expertise. They are not building the element of skills that AI still can't deliver, which is judgment. That is a critical distinction between a real skill and repeating what AI gives you.

If you are not careful, and you are not assessing on a regular basis, that risk stays hidden. You can skate by and paper over a lack of skills with a whole bunch of AI-generated content, whether emails or responses to RFPs. AI can generate a lot of content, and it hides the real risk, which is that there is no domain expertise and no depth of the kind that comes with learning.

That is why learning continues to be important. The gap surfaces when it is most expensive. At some point in business you are going to make a gut decision based on your experience and the skills you have accumulated over several years, and you can't rely on AI to make that call for you.

There is another place we see this. AI keeps taking you down the rabbit hole with more options and more scenarios, and you end up with 15 pages of responses to a very simple question that you then have to process. That doesn't mean you can skip training everybody and hand the work to agents.

Judgment Is Earned

Judgment and relationships develop over time through experience. Use AI as a support system without letting go of your domain expertise.

Agents are really powerful, and they will be used to support better decision making, but there will always be judgment calls and relationships to build. Sometimes you have to lean on relationships. AI can never replace those skills, and they fall into the earned skill category because you develop them over time through different experiences.

We are trying to capture those skills and combine them with AI to supercharge outcomes. AI on its own won't do it. If you dismiss AI you will be left behind, so the balance is to leverage it as a support system without letting go of the domain expertise you have in your function.

Skills Have to Be Ingrained In Day-to-Day, Mission-Critical Work

Q David

How can companies measure judgment before it becomes expensive?

A Bernie

That is a great question. Someone at one of our advisory boards recently asked how to move some of these assessments further upstream. During an interview process everybody loves a candidate, and six months after they start you realize you totally missed the mark and the person isn't a good fit. It is a need across the board, and it has always existed.

You start to measure these capabilities in the flow of work. Look at the decisions being made and how people work today, with the majority of their time spent in an enterprise chatbot. They use it for search, research and asking questions, and all of those are opportunities to pick up signals from how people interact.

The same goes for understanding the learner and personalization. There is a lot to catch from how people work every day in Slack, Teams, Zoom, chat agents and enterprise bots. That is where you pick up signals and experiences that reflect what people are actually seeing, in contrast to a test they take.

Skills have to be ingrained in day-to-day, mission-critical work and not handled off to the side. Whether you are delivering training in the flow of work or learning about your learners in that flow, it happens where they actually are.

Learning Needs Real Stakes

Getting closer to real stakes makes learning stick, while people still feel safe to make mistakes and grow.

Q David

Once the gaps are identified, how do we close them across the workforce without falling back on shoving content at people?

Meet Learners Where They Are

A Bernie

We need to do this at scale and in a meaningful way. We touched on the flow of work and how we intercept signals there to learn about learners. The same applies when we deliver. To make learning stick when you are developing skills, make sure there are stakes at play. A no-stakes environment feels good and is safe for making mistakes, and people should be safe to make mistakes and learn in a real-stakes environment too. Getting closer to real stakes makes a difference.

Other ways to scale involve meeting learners where they are and delivering coaching to a much broader audience than the reserved pool of high potentials and leaders. Those capabilities are now coming to market. Coaching built on International Coaching Federation standards goes well beyond the next chatbot. It develops goal setting and shows learners how to grow, and it meets them where they are in a way that is meaningful for them.

Custom content matters too, and that means more than an off-the-shelf course on how to have a difficult conversation. It means content specific to an organization, such as safety training that represents the manufacturing floor. Those approaches make learning stickier and more relevant in the moment, and a system that can deliver them at scale is absolutely critical. The infrastructure and technology matter, but the most important pieces are meeting learners where they are and making sure there are stakes in the learning we deliver.

Personalization In the Moment

Feedback delivered right after a call goes off track, in a small burst, is far more valuable than generic off-the-shelf training.

Q David

How does defining proficiency levels help make learning more relevant to each person?

**Start With
One Business
Outcome
and One
Measurement****A Bernie**

We refer to it as personalization, and it is a passion of mine. There is so much you can learn from interactions with someone willing to engage with your systems and solutions. We can tell you a lot about our learners based on what they have done with us and on what they do day to day.

Think about personalized learning delivered to a call center representative, and not simply because I know they are a call center representative. I can take their last conversation log, see that it went off the rails quickly, and tell them to try a different tactic next time. I deliver that right in the moment, right when it happened, in a very small burst. Nothing is more valuable to someone. That is dynamic, custom training for that person at that moment, and it goes well beyond generic off-the-shelf training. The possibilities are endless across shop floors, finance and HR. Wherever a very specific need exists, you can give feedback in that moment on how to handle something better.

Q David

For a leader sitting on a mountain of data, what should they do first?

A Bernie

It can be daunting to look at all of that and wonder how to decompose it. My advice is to start with one business outcome and one measurement. Make it real. Think about what your CEO or leader is asking you to deliver. Choose something that is hard to do but may be not the hardest thing in the organization, and think about what you will measure when you succeed.

Bring it in, get a win and then you will see what it looks like. From there you can expand it. Otherwise you will sit under the mountain of data asking where to get started, and that is really hard to do.

**Don't Speed Up
a Bad Process**

Moving too fast without defining the problem you're solving only makes a bad process worse.

Bring Learning Out of HR and Into the C-Suite

Q David

What happens when organizations wait for AI to fix a problem they haven't defined?

A Bernie

It is easy to take a bad process and make it worse by going too fast without thinking about the problem you are trying to solve.

Q David

What does it take for learning leaders to break from the traditional approach?

A Bernie

Look at the traditional L&D group that sits inside an HR function. We want to break that mindset and bring learning into the C-suite. Figure out what your internal customers are trying to achieve and make them successful by making sure they have the skills. That is a shift away from the traditional L&D mindset and toward a focus on business outcomes. Everyone we speak with says that will demonstrate value for their group, but it is hard to get started. That is why bringing it down to one thing you can do and one thing you can measure matters. You build on that success and then demonstrate the value across the organization.

We see it in many ways. Sales enablement teams have very little to do with traditional L&D, yet they receive budgets because they have to enable their teams or the company won't make its revenue.

The Sales Enablement Lesson

Sales enablement teams get budgets because their work ties directly to revenue. That is learning connected to a clear business outcome.

Different Asks, Different Paths

Certifying engineers and preparing leaders to talk about frontier models in the boardroom are different goals that need different solutions.

That is a crystal-clear case of getting to a business outcome with training and learning, and it makes for an easy discussion internally. It changes the game. Learning then becomes part of a customer's 10-year strategy for where it wants to get to. It starts with taking that step and finding the measure and the business problem you want to drive home.

Q David

How does a learning leader find out what the business is really asking for?

A Bernie

What are you being asked for, and how do we measure that we are moving the needle? We had a customer example. Anthropic launched its certified architect program and released Mythos, and L&D got tapped on the shoulder with requests to find out what the company knows about the architecture certification and about Mythos. The right response is to ask what they are trying to answer. Do you want to get your engineers certified? That is one path. Do you want to walk into the boardroom and talk about Fable, Mythos and the latest frontier models? That is another path.

Each has a different solution, and each is equally fast, but the discussion moves from "just give me the training" to "what are you trying to achieve." Then I can give you the right training at the right level and at the right moment. It really is that simple if you step back and ask what we are trying to achieve and what we are being asked for, and then work out how to deliver the skills you need to execute.



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