Addressing the skills shortage and improving student employability
Learning the skills of the future, today

Microsoft is committed to offering skills training that helps learners advance their careers and meet the changing needs of society, writes Laura Longcore, vice-president of Worldwide Learning at Microsoft.

As Microsoft, our mission is to empower every person and organisation on the planet to achieve more. A critical part of succeeding in this mission is ensuring that current and future generations can develop the skills needed not only to participate in the rapidly evolving digital and technological landscape but also to drive and shape it. It is my great pleasure to share our commitment to bridging the skills gap by providing students, educators, and education institutions with access to programmes and solutions that empower teaching and learning while expanding career opportunities and access for all learners.

To address this issue, Microsoft has proudly invested in a variety of certification programmes, curricular offerings and talent solutions that enable institutions to support learners, whether they are yet to enter the workforce or are early in their careers, and allow them to acquire the technical skills to gain competitive employment.

One such offering is Microsoft Learn for Educators, a comprehensive programme that provides educators with the resources, support, and professional development to teach students technical skills that are aligned with industry demands, setting them on the path to career success. Within this programme, instructors and educational institutions can access a variety of resources, including teaching guides, lesson plans, and interactive labs, to deliver high-quality, industry-relevant coursework.

Another offering is Microsoft Learn Career Connected, a programme that combines training resources from Microsoft Learn with the networking power of LinkedIn to help students start their careers in the tech industry. The programme fosters partnerships with customers, higher education institutions, and other partners to support career growth and job opportunities. Moreover, Microsoft Certifications have been designed to be industry-relevant and are recognised globally, making them an excellent addition to any résumé. They also offer a pathway for learners to advance their careers and stay up to date with emerging technologies.

As the higher education sector looks to the future of learning, it must recognise the need to be agile and adapt, to meet the changing needs of society. Microsoft is committed to staying at the forefront of this change and working collaboratively with colleges, universities, and our industry partners to equip the next generation of technology professionals with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

I’m proud that Microsoft is committed to bridging the skills gap by providing students, teachers, and education institutions with access to ready-made, instructor-led curriculum that can put students on a path to a variety of technical careers.

Debasis Bhattacharya, associate professor at Maui College at the University of Hawaii, teaches applied business and information technology and uses MSLE to support his students in gaining digital certifications that will make them stand out to employers. “The course itself is geared up for this as an applied business and information course and helps students into business positions that require technical skills, for example, to work as a technologist in a medical company,” he says.

Before the pandemic, Hawaii’s labour market was dominated by the hospitality industry, and the pool of employers and potential employees tended to be restricted to the island itself. But when Covid hit, there was an economic shock for those in the hospitality sector, and many islanders ended up without work. Since then, however, there has been a resurgence in the number of roles available to the 2,200 or so students at the college.

“We now have a number of jobs that are not necessarily on the island, or where employees don’t necessarily have to be on the island, or where people from Hawaii can take roles in companies off the island where they can work remotely,” explains Bhattacharya. “We have adapted to the shift, and the market of employers for our students has increased.”

Many of these roles offer higher salaries than were on offer before the pandemic, and almost all require digital skills to operate successfully on a remote basis.

Educators work with students on certifications in their specialist fields, Bhattacharya says. Students are working towards Microsoft Fundamentals certifications in Security, Compliance, and Identity Fundamentals; Azure Artificial Intelligence Fundamentals; Azure AI Fundamentals; and Azure Data Fundamentals. “Our students are very interested and motivated to add certifications to their list of credentials. This is largely due to an awareness that employers value these industry certifications in addition to college degrees. Integrating these certifications along with college courses means students can gain in-demand skills before they begin applying for jobs, giving them a head-start after graduation. These certifications are reliable and valid indicators of employment potential, as students are...
computing, artificial intelligence, data, with Microsoft certifications in cloud which connects job seekers with Microsoft. Bhattacharya says. "postings requiring Microsoft Azure credentials, and honing their skills, and dedicating LinkedIn group have also been useful for students in terms of curriculum planning, interacting with instructors," he says. "Students could just access courses for continuing education at Calgary. According to Vui Kien Liu, associate director of technology programmes for continuing education at Calgary, "Students could just access courses on the internet, but they get value out of the experience of sharing and interacting with instructors," he says. "The MSLE programme helps us to build a curriculum that appeals to all learners." One success story is Sasan Taghadosi who completed an Azure Data Fundamentals Certification and is now working at the Royal Bank of Canada as a senior data quality analyst. He had previously studied for a master’s and wanted to pursue a new career in a technical data-related field. Liu helped him to achieve this through interactive lab demos and by pointing him to the relevant Microsoft Learn learning path, which showed him the certifications he would need. Taghadosi also completed the AI Fundamentals training and can therefore offer employers his skills in both cloud and artificial intelligence – two of the most in-demand technologies. "Cloud computing penetrates every industry, so if four students can use these credentials to enhance their work, they have access to better opportunities," Liu says.

Skills to start careers Students at Eastern Washington University (EWU), meanwhile, are in high demand for their data analytics skills. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, demand for people with data science skills will increase by 28 per cent by 2026 in the US alone, making graduates in this area a much sought-after commodity. The university runs several data majors, including business systems and analytics, and data analytics. Employers often approach EWU's College of Professional Programs when they're looking to build a talent pipeline in this area, according to Alexandros Paparas, assistant professor at EWU. "Businesses often come to us looking for potential recruits, so the students all find jobs before they graduate.”

Although EWU is in the early stages of using MSLE to support its teaching, many students have already successfully achieved certifications ranging from Azure Fundamentals to Power Platform. These credentials will afford them an advantage in the labour market, Paparas believes. "We want them to take these credentials because it shows they can handle data, can work with cloud technology or manage security," he says. The students are then viewing and applying for jobs posted on LinkedIn via Microsoft Learn Career Connected, where potential employers can see evidence of their skills (through certification). While students often build early links with employers and apply directly for roles, the Microsoft Learn Career Connected programme and dedicated LinkedIn group have also been useful for students in terms of networking, showcasing their credentials, and honing their job applications. Like other universities using MSLE, EWU is able to use MSLE to help it implement Microsoft certifications alongside its existing degree programmes. This gives educators the confidence to provide students with work-ready capabilities when they start their careers. "Gaining these certifications is important," says Paparas. "Once you gain a certificate, you might not get a change to re-learn these things. We want students to build techniques they can apply in the real world.

"Employers value industry certifications in addition to college degrees" and there is a Microsoft Learn Career Connected LinkedIn community where students can connect with Microsoft customers and partners that are looking to hire people that have technical skills. They can interact with a community of other students, look at their experiences, talk to employers who untangle certain skills – there are many ways to help decide which path they want to take," he adds. Enrolling in the programme has helped Maui College expand its career advisory support for students beyond traditional employer partnerships. Bhattacharya feels that the MSLE programme has empowered educators at Maui College beyond practical support such as access to curriculum frameworks and teaching tools. Colleagues in associated disciplines such as cybersecurity or artificial intelligence can get tips and tricks for teaching the Fundamentals courses in those certifications, so they feel more supported. "Many (technology vendors) provide courses, but this feels like we get something more," he says.

Continuing education in Canada The University of Calgary in Canada was the first institution in the country to become an education global training partner with Microsoft, and, so far, it has trained more than 13,000 students in Microsoft Azure Cloud. To date, over 2,400 students from the university have achieved Microsoft certifications; the majority have been in Microsoft Azure Fundamentals, and just over 100 have gained advanced role-based certifications in Azure Data Scientist Associate and Azure AI Engineer Associate. Calgary is situated in southern Alberta, where the local labour market has seen a marked shift in the past decade. Historically, lots of employment opportunities came from oil and gas, whether working in offices or in the field. The Alberta 2030 Vision aims to develop a highly skilled and competitive workforce in growth areas such as renewable energies and technology, so offering Microsoft credentials to local students and lifelong learners supports these wider ambitions. Furthermore, Microsoft certifications are in high demand in Canada. According to data insights company Lightcast, 87,462 job postings requiring Microsoft Azure skills were posted between May 2022 and May 2023. MSLE helps educators at the university deliver programmes that will prepare students for these vital certifications. Many of Calgary’s students enrolled in technical programmes have experience in the workplace but don’t necessarily know where technology fits into their careers or how they can pivot their careers to keep up with the rapid pace of digital change, explains Ewa Waszewska, director of domestic programmes at the university. Acquiring industry certifications can help even experienced employees demonstrate that they are keeping pace with digital developments in the workplace. “We’re trying to do skills-gap analyses with employers, but it can be challenging because we’re training for a field of work that might not be there yet,” she says. Further support has come from MSLE in terms of curriculum planning, according to Vui Kien Liu, associate director of technology programmes for continuing education at Calgary. “Students could just access courses on the internet, but they get value out of the experience of sharing and interacting with instructors,” he says. “The MSLE programme helps us to build a curriculum that appeals to all learners.”

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"We want students to build techniques they can apply in the real world"
Making career connections: how Microsoft unlocks opportunities for new talent

Gaining digital credentials is just the first step towards a rewarding career in tech. Microsoft Learn Career Connected can link students with a range of opportunities with employers.

The market for technical skills continues to evolve and grow, and employers need a sustainable stream of talent to realise their ambitions. Yet many experience a digital skills gap, meaning they struggle to access professionals with the right experience and qualifications in current and emerging technologies.

The pandemic cemented the fact that even the most traditional business has to compete in a digital space. The Microsoft Learn Career Connected programme is helping to address the issue by connecting students with opportunities to learn — whether on their own or through organisations that recruit and train. Microsoft Learn Career Connected can also connect students with job opportunities and a network of potential employers.

Avanade has a long history with Microsoft having begun as a joint venture between the tech giant and Accenture in 2000. This means it is uniquely positioned to offer opportunities that require diverse backgrounds,” explains Mirjam van Ost, talent lead for global tech talent programmes.

The programme is split into two parts – digital skills and consulting skills – the latter of which helps them develop soft skills such as negotiation or team leadership, which will prepare them to deliver real-world projects. This is useful because some participants already have digital expertise but need specific Microsoft qualifications, while others want to build their consultancy skills.

The minimum requirement is a high school diploma, a threshold that means participants come from a wide range of backgrounds. “We do tech training over Teams and pair that with mentorship,” explains Liz McGlenner, executive director of TechFluent. “It’s hard to get into a role in the technical sector if you don’t have a network or a guide to explain things. Each student starts with a mentor from an IT team, then a second mentor towards the end of the course that helps them to look for a job.” Microsoft Learn Career Connected complements the way TechFluent’s programme is structured because students can see job opportunities that match their skills, while the organisation itself can reach out for volunteers. Microsoft Learn Career Connected’s dedicated LinkedIn community means they have a ready-made network of fellow digital professionals.

TechFluent has now run its programme for two years. Several graduates have been successful in finding new jobs in technology, and one has become an entrepreneur. “Some people know the industry but not the tech, while others are vice versa,” says McGlenner. “Traditionally, tech people have been programmers, but now the gap is in the people skills part. We bring that key middle point between the tech and the users.”

When it comes to providing learners with the support they need to build a career in the digital industry, Microsoft Learn Career Connected has been invaluable, McGlenner concludes. For those looking to start a career in tech, Microsoft Learn Career Connected provides a hands-on source of advice on potential career paths, training options, a ready-made network of like-minded peers and employment opportunities with Microsoft customers and partners.