

Upskilling is the deciding factor

Business battles are fiercely fought and won not in markets, but training rooms

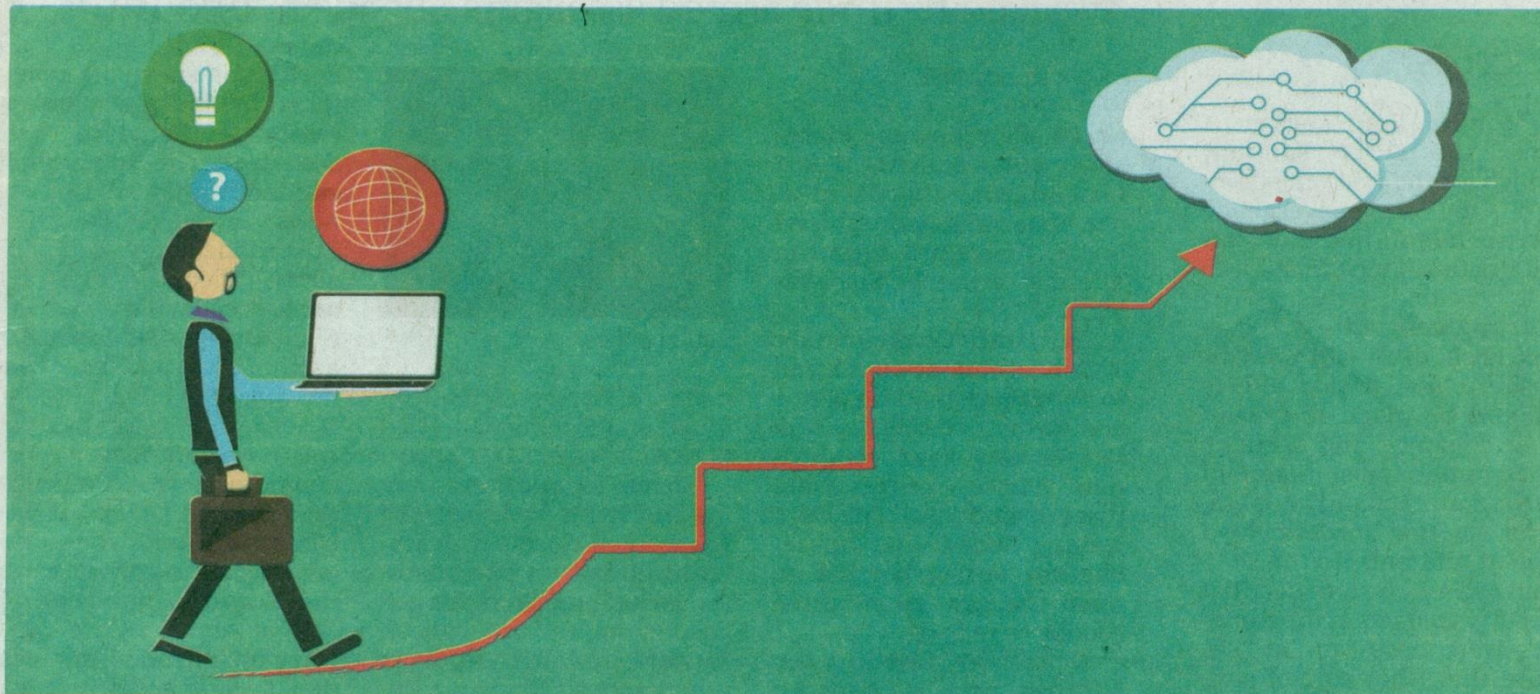


ILLUSTRATION: MIHIR BALANTRAPU

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With the advent of smart phones, cloud computing and social networks, even the everyday and mundane aspects of our lives have changed dramatically. The way we book our tickets for an outstation journey, plan and organise our stay, hail a cab, buy groceries, look for a restaurant, plan a visit to a friend and conduct many other day-to-day activities has changed.

Similarly, almost every business process has been deeply impacted by digital technologies. Various functions carried out across the organisation by employees, right from the CEO to the junior-most executive, have undergone a sea change. For communication, social media, video, online notice boards, chats and webinars are used extensively. Online tools are used to invite vendors, compare proposals and place orders.

All functions in the company, including human resources, finance, sales, man-

ufacturing, supply chain and after-sales services, are performed with almost complete reliance on IT tools.

Therefore, employees should be savvy in using IT tools. Asking employees to take advantage of IT tools and deliver more in terms of volume is the order of the day. Upskilling and retraining employees have never been so important as it is now.

Naturally, this need is felt the most in the IT sector, where engineers have to constantly learn new technologies and apply them in solving business problems. However, in all other sectors too, upskilling is necessary to reduce the cycle time and increase the number of tasks employees do on a typical day.

Upskilling is not easy.

The technological changes around us have been rapid. While trying to keep pace with them, we face many challenges. One, learning ability varies from person to person. All organisations do not have the bandwidth to retrain employees to enable them take on new tasks.

Upskilling is not about getting people to attend a training programme. One of the major impediments to upskilling is making employees accept the fact that the training is for their good and they must use the acquired knowledge to take on more responsibilities. For these programmes to succeed, leaders have to drive this change from the front.

As the pace of conducting business has increased greatly, organisations tend to look for ready-made talent. At times, they look for an instant solution, pretty much like having a noodle in two minutes.

They run a few training programmes and hope that their employees would be able to deliver the expected results immediately after the training. Patience is a virtue, but not found aplenty because of the extraordinarily high demands on the business. Hence, this is the biggest impediment companies will encounter on the path to upskilling. When an organisation lays off employees whose skills are outdated, there are many hid-

den costs such as the cost of recruiting a new person, inducting and training him or her, besides the severance pay. Apart from these costs, the performance of new hires may pose a risk to the company's reputation.

If the employee is willing to learn and apply the newly-acquired skills, the leadership must create an environment in which the employees know what is coming and get a fair chance to explore the opportunity of acquiring new skills, take on new challenges and get updated with the times they live in. The leadership must be transparent and build an environment of trust between the employees and their managers such that the need of upskilling does not come as a shock. It's highly desirable that the employee sees the need of upskilling and looks for avenues to stay relevant.

Organisational culture plays an important role in this area.

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