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Growing gig workforce compels India Inc to rethink talent development strategies



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Article Content:

While flexible hiring offers greater agility and cost efficiencies, experts caution that reducing investment in workforce capability could weaken long-term talent pipelines and leave businesses underprepared for future skill demands.

Highlights

- Future L&D strategies should cater equally to permanent, freelance, gig and contract workers through flexible learning pathways.
- AI is reducing the need for conventional classroom training while increasing demand for personalised and technology-enabled learning.
- Continuous upskilling is becoming essential as employees increasingly move across roles and employment models.

As organisations increase their reliance on gig, contract and contingent workers, HR leaders are re-evaluating how they invest in learning and development (L&D).

With NITI Aayog estimating India's gig workforce at 77 lakh in 2020–21, projected to grow to 2.35 crore by 2029–30, employers can no longer design skills only for permanent, long-tenured employees.

While flexible hiring offers greater agility and cost efficiencies, experts caution that reducing investment in workforce capability could weaken long-term talent pipelines and leave businesses underprepared for future skill demands.

The rise of non-permanent employment has fundamentally altered the return-on-investment (ROI) calculation for corporate learning budgets.

Shantanu Rooj, Founder and CEO, TeamLease EdTech, shared organisations need to move away from viewing workforce development as an investment reserved only for permanent employees.

"With India's gig workforce expected to grow significantly over the next few years, employers can no longer design skills only for long-tenured employees," Rooj said.

Jayanth Neelakanta, CEO, Equip & AutoProctor, said technology has already been reducing the need for conventional training, with automation replacing many tasks that previously required extensive employee development.

"Gig hiring is accelerating a trend that was already underway. Once a worker is temporary, training often gets viewed alongside benefits such as insurance and perks; something outside the core employment commitment," he added.

According to Pragya Joshi, Vice President-HR, Primus Partners, organisations must rethink both the content and delivery of learning programmes as artificial intelligence reshapes jobs and career paths become increasingly non-linear.

"Employees will always need learning and development. But the format has to evolve with personalized learning strategies that address the needs of permanent, freelance, gig and contract workers alike," Joshi added

Despite the growing adoption of flexible workforce models, experts agreed that organisations cannot afford to compromise on capability building.

Rooj stressed that employers must separate employment status from skill development.

"Even if workers are contractual, gig-based or project-linked, they still need access to role clarity, micro-learning, certification, safety training, digital tools and performance feedback," he said.

He advocated building "skills-as-infrastructure" through stackable credentials, AI-enabled learning and work-based assessments.

Neelakanta argued that employers should first determine which capabilities genuinely require long-term investment.

"If business is modular enough that a transactional piece plugs in and the task is effectively commoditised, you may not need to build that skill at all," he said.

Joshi believes organisations need a broader rethink of workforce planning itself.

"Building critical skills is the final outcome; the starting point is rethinking the way we work," she said.

She argued that organisations should move beyond job-based planning towards outcome-based workforce design by identifying critical roles, workflows and capabilities

"The workplace of the future demands a paradigm shift in workforce planning, talent acquisition, learning and development strategies and organisation structures. An enterprise approach is needed to stay ahead," Joshi added.

As businesses continue balancing flexibility with capability, the consensus emerging among experts is that while employment relationships may become more flexible, investment in critical skills and organisational knowledge cannot.