Why Your Team Forgets 90% of Their Soft Skills Training and How to Fix It
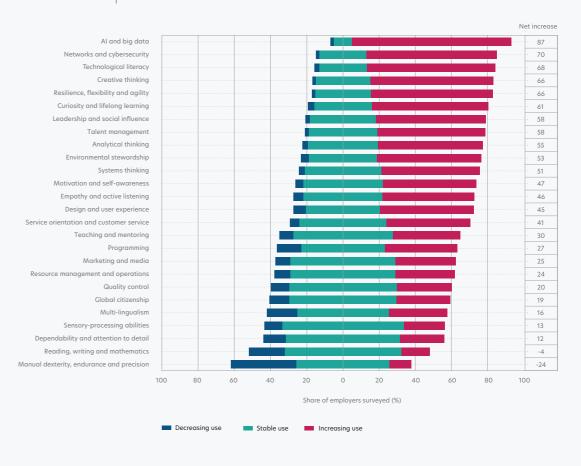
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There's a tough reality we all need to face: our current approaches to training vital soft skills like leadership, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity simply aren't working. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), these skills rank among the most important for the future workplace—they are second only to technical skills like coding or data analytics [1].

In a world increasingly disrupted by automation, AI, and other technologies, ensuring we can upskill and reskill our workforce in these critical soft skills is essential [2]. Yet, the soft skills training we invest billions of dollars into each year rarely achieves the lasting retention and transfer needed to genuinely move the needle on performance.

Why is this? Results from decades of academic research and my own experience of over 20 years designing and delivering soft skills training interventions point to a central issue: there are significant gaps in alignment between traditional approaches to soft skills development (i.e., classroom training) and how working adults learn and change [3][4]. So, why are we still relying on methods that don't deliver?

FIGURE 3.4 | **Skills on the rise, 2025-2030**

Share of employers that consider skills to be increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable in importance. Skills are ranked based on net increase, which is the difference between the share of employers that consider a skill category to be increasing in use and those that consider it to be decreasing in use.

Skill	Net increase
AI and big data	87
Networks and cybersecurity	70
Technological literacy	68
Creative thinking	66
Resilience, flexibility and agility	66
Curiosity and lifelong learning	61
Leadership and social influence	58
Talent management	58
Analytical thinking	55
Environmental stewardship	53
Systems thinking	51
Motivation and self-awareness	47
Empathy and active listening	46
Design and user experience	45
Service orientation and customer service	41
Teaching and mentoring	30
Programming	27
Marketing and media	25
Resource management and operations	24
Quality control	20
Global citizenship	19
Multi-lingualism	16
Sensory-processing abilities	13
Dependability and attention to detail	12
Reading, writing and mathematics	-4
Manual dexterity, endurance and precision	-24

Share of employers surveyed (%)

■ Decreasing use ■ Stable use ■ Increasing use

Source
World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2024.

WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025, Pg. 37, https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf

Note
The Future of Jobs Survey uses the World Economic Forum's Global Skills Taxonomy.

Why Traditional Training Falls Short for Soft Skills Development

Live classroom training as a modality has a tremendous amount of value. It brings people together, which means questions are quick and easy to answer, practice is easier to observe, and feedback is easier to provide. However, traditional classroom training still has some fundamental gaps.

Let's unpack why typical classroom training alone struggles to make a lasting impact on soft skills:

- **Cognitive Overload:** Have you ever sat through an eight-hour training day? By lunch, you're exhausted. Cognitive load theory explains that our brains can only handle so much new information at once [5]. Traditional training crams too much content in too little time, leaving participants overwhelmed and unlikely to remember much.

- **Forgetting Happens Fast:** Ebbinghaus's forgetting curve theory shows we rapidly lose new information without reinforcement—often forgetting most of what we learned within days [6]. Classroom training usually ends when the session does, with little follow-up or reinforcement. Without regular practice and real-world application, 70% of what's learned is forgotten within 24 hours, and up to 90% of the rest of what was learned is forgotten within a week.

- **Ignoring Emotional and Behavioural Elements:** Soft skills are emotional, behavioural, and complex. They require authentic practice and real-world application—something classroom experiences can struggle to provide at the individual level [7].

- **Lack of Job Relevance:** Most classroom sessions (and the design process that leads up to them) tend to have a content-first approach. L&D teams capture a need from the business, or some competencies are developed, then the focus switches to finding or developing the right course for that need. This often leads to experiences that focus heavily on content and theory, ignoring what adult learners really need, which is ruthless relevance and a convincing value proposition. Unfortunately, traditional classroom training often lacks this direct relevance at the individual level, significantly reducing learner motivation and retention [8].

- **No Post-Training Support:** Without structured support to help apply new skills back at work, training fades quickly, and newly learned skills rarely become lasting habits. Moreover, research consistently highlights the crucial role managers play in reinforcing and supporting employees post-training. Without active managerial involvement, coaching, and structured opportunities for on-the-job application, the transfer of new skills is greatly diminished [9][10].

3 Forms of Cognitive Load

Intrinsic
Complexity of new information
[SIMPLIFY]

Extraneous
Distracts working memory from processing new information
[REDUCE]

Germane
Deep processing of new information by integrating it with previous learning
[MAXIMISE]

How We Can Do Better and Make Soft Skills Stick

From my experience and research, a better approach is not just possible—it's proven. Here's how organisations can dramatically improve the effectiveness of soft skills training:

Augmenting Instead of Replacing | Classroom training can be incredibly valuable, but only in very specific contexts. As pointed out in this article, it has some serious limitations around knowledge retention and application. So, it's not about eliminating the classroom; it's about enhancing training outcomes by recognising the inherent limitations of any single modality and strategically combining different approaches. Leveraging complementary modalities and design approaches thoughtfully, for example, in addition to the classroom training, having a virtual discussion activity with fellow classmates, and a short video recap of the classroom training content later in the week, can dramatically improve learning effectiveness and achieve lasting behavioural change.

Attendance & Completion vs. Retention & Transfer | Globally, L&D teams are often measured against KPIs focused primarily on training hours, attendance, and completion rates. Rarely do these KPIs accurately reflect meaningful learning outcomes or genuine skill transfer. While classroom training can serve as a reassuring method to guarantee attendance, it typically falls short in supporting real behavioural change. If organisations shift their focus toward true learning retention and practical on-the-job application, they will likely become more open to exploring holistic, integrated learning approaches that deliver lasting results.

Start with Problems (Productive Failure) | Traditional soft skills training often provides content and solutions before learners even recognise or buy into a problem, leading to shallow engagement. Productive failure flips this approach, deliberately beginning with authentic, challenging scenarios where learners initially struggle or make authentic mistakes. This process encourages deeper cognitive and emotional engagement, prompting learners to reflect, question assumptions, and identify their own knowledge gaps. When followed by guided instruction, this approach has proven highly effective for long-term retention and meaningful skill transfer into real-world behaviours [11].

Space It Out | Instead of one big session, training should be delivered in spaced intervals, reinforcing learning over time to combat the forgetting curve [6]. At a minimum, use multiple, shorter learning sessions. Ideally, leverage some form a social learning technology or platform that can support learning, practice, and application after a classroom session has ended.

Microlearning in the Workflow | Short, focused learning segments, on-the-job missions, practice activities, challenges, and discussions that are embedded into daily tasks reduce cognitive load, improve retention, and boost immediate access in the flow of work [12].

Social Learning Matters | Learning is inherently social. Training designs should include peer interaction and collaboration, creating continuous reinforcement and support.

Use Personalised Digital Platforms (LXPs) | Learner-centric digital tools offer personalised experiences, robust engagement tools (i.e., gamification), adapt to learner progress, and significantly enhance engagement and retention [13].

Fit-to-Purpose Course Design | Any design decisions should be carefully matched to the targeted audience, environment, and outcomes. Trying to reach a large and geographically dispersed audience? There's an approach for that. Aiming for deep behaviour change and mindset shift (vs. awareness)? There's a design for that. Trying to reach 5 C-suite leaders? There's a different approach for that too! Performing an honest, upfront analysis on the learners, the business, and desired outcomes will help define the "must haves," "nice to haves," and "avoids" of any design.

A Real-Life Soft Skills Development Example from Asia

One regional Asian bank faced exactly the challenge discussed: they needed to develop critical future skills and career engagement for over 6,000 employees across APAC. Despite the RFP specifically requesting a few days of classroom training, we knew that approach wasn't going to meet their goals at both an outcomes and logistics level. A design that balanced scale and impact was required.

A robust learner and business-centric design process led to the creation of a digitally-enabled hybrid learning journey. We combined short, engaging live training (virtual and in-person options) supported by in-platform microlearning, social interactions, robust gamification, and authentic problem-solving tasks—all spaced over time to respect learners' cognitive load (and schedules!).

Learning in Practice Awards
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Despite the initial resistance to a hybrid, self-directed learning experience, the results spoke for themselves:

1000s of learners reached

Over 90% learner engagement (measured by the earning of points and the completion of key activities)

41% boost in learner confidence in building their growth mindset

40% improvement in development conversations with managers

23% increase in real-world skill usage

98% would recommend the training to colleagues

This shows that modern, learner-centric methods not only outperform traditional training—they deliver measurable, real-world impact at scale.

Practical Steps to Transform Your Organisation's Soft Skills Training

Here's how your organisation can start today:

- **Change Mindset:** Shift from a content-centric and "attendance mindset" to a learner-centric "retention and transfer" mindset.

- **Create Urgency:** Start with "why." Learners demand relevance and urgency. It's the way our brains are wired.

- **Open the Door:** Realise the strengths and limitations of classroom training and any given modality, and be open to other approaches that will lead to better results.

- **Measure and Improve Constantly:** Regularly track skill application, not just completion rates, and use this data to continuously refine training programmes.

Turning Crisis into Opportunity

The need for effective soft skills development has never been greater. Sticking to old, ineffective methods simply isn't an option. By embracing innovative, evidence-based strategies, your learners and organisation can enhance soft skills training ROI and unlock the potential of your workforce to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

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Currently based in Sydney, Australia. Ben looks after GP Strategies Australian, Singaporean and Malaysian markets, plus head up the GP Strategies AMEA leadership practice. He has lived and worked across Asia-Pacific for 20+ years. Throughout that time, he has pursued the goal of bringing together technology and innovative design practices to drive retention and transfer across learning domains and industries. He has partnered with stakeholders from across businesses to define learning strategies, design successful hybrid learning experiences, and make intelligent investments in learning technology.

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