

The Delta Air Lines Playbook

Six Best Practices for Building a Skills-Based Organization

Delta Air Lines is leading the way on building a workforce that's resilient, adaptable, and future-focused through a skills-based organization. This case study distills six key practices from their playbook.



In January 2024, the International Monetary Fund warned that artificial intelligence is set to affect 40% of jobs globally, including up to 60% of jobs in advanced economies. Unlike previous waves of automation that primarily displaced routine physical and manual work, AI's ability to replicate cognitive tasks means that white-collar and knowledge roles are now equally exposed. The IMF's analysis was unambiguous: roughly half of those affected jobs could see productivity gains, while the other half face reduced demand, lower wages, or elimination.

The opportunity is real for organizations that move quickly. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects that 170 million new roles will be created globally by 2030, even as 92 million are displaced, a net gain of 78 million jobs. The same report finds that 59% of the global workforce will need reskilling or upskilling by 2030 to remain competitive.

The scale of response required is significant. McKinsey & Company estimates these changes could lead 14% of the global workforce, some 375 million workers, to change occupations by 2030. Given the talent scarcity, with a 4.1% U.S. unemployment rate as of August 2026, companies cannot rely on finding these skills in the external talent market. They must invest in building them internally.

To reskill their workforces in response to disruptive technologies and market dynamics, organizations must shift from rigid, hierarchical job architectures to more agile, dynamic models. These models will create pathways based on skills rather than jobs. At their core, these changes uproot outdated frameworks and processes, requiring a mindset shift in how work is done and how talent moves across the organization.

In light of the IMF's findings, we got curious which companies were ahead of this trend. Delta Air Lines rose to the top of that list. In February 2024, we sat down with some of the key architects of their skills-first strategy to learn more about what they were doing.

Delta Air Lines' Flight to Skills-First

At Delta Air Lines, the call to action began with the CEO, Ed Bastian. In December 2020, Bastian championed a "skills-first" journey to remove unnecessary barriers to professional development. The spark

for this initiative was to create more equitable career growth and compensation for frontline employees. But Bastian's commitment went beyond creating employee equity. He knew a skills-first approach would drive better business outcomes. Out of this belief, Delta's work evolved from a focused initiative to an all-company priority.

For Bastian, this skills-first strategy provided more opportunities to leverage Delta employees' experiences for the customer's good. He believed bringing frontline workers into management would help everyone in the organization better understand what it's like to work on a ramp, in the cold, with a frustrated customer on a flight, as Linda Hill, the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, notes. The strategy also made good business sense because, as Bastian told leaders, "If you take care of your people, they take care of your customers."

Delta's new skills-first approach required a significant cultural shift. Asking an organization with 100,000 employees operating in a decentralized, siloed model to move to an enterprise-wide view of work is a heavy lift. Fernando Hueda, Delta's General Manager of Compensation Design, said, "This is like trying to turn the Titanic in a pond." However, the drivers and value proposition for change were clear.

As Natalie Katz, General Manager of Skills Strategy at Delta, describes it:

"I think there was the instability of the airline industry generally at that time that was scaring people. Other industries were hiring like crazy and paying really high salaries, and we were seeing people leave (which was new for Delta). So, there is a whole value proposition around career pathing and transparency that gives employees confidence that they can stay at Delta and either grow or change their careers. How do we proactively get to know the skills of our internal talent and provide them with a great value proposition of career transparency and growth internally?"

Working closely with organizational leaders throughout the validation process helped reinforce the value of keeping skills at a broader scale. Lia Santos, a Mercer partner integral to the Delta initiative, says the airline realized the key to organizational support was making the connection that a more agile, skills-embedded job architecture would open new channels for talent sourcing and boost employee career growth.

To continue to prioritize skills and stay ahead of future needs, Delta created a Skills Strategy group in early 2023. The group focused first on building a skills taxonomy housed within the Talent Management function, then began aligning skills with career growth by leveraging an enterprise-wide skills architecture.

"There's such value to say, for the areas of the business where we don't have internal talent ready today, how do we proactively build these pipelines of talent to prepare for a future-ready workforce? Through a skills architecture, we know exactly what we're looking for and if we do or don't have that talent readily available." (Natalie Katz)

Six Key Practices

#1: Make the Business Case

Senior leaders and employees need to understand the business case for adopting a skills-based approach. According to Deloitte, skills-centered organizations are:

- 107% more likely to place talent effectively.
- 49% more likely to improve processes to maximize efficiency.
- 57% more likely to anticipate change in the market and respond effectively.

By developing an internal skills marketplace, organizations can rapidly access the workforce skills needed to respond to changes and stay competitive in the face of market disruptions. Employees must also understand how they will benefit. As Harvard Business Review reports, when workers clearly understand strengths-based career paths, they are willing to stay and grow with the organization.

Delta spent considerable time building understanding across the organization. According to Hueda, embedding skills into agile job architecture shifts employee mindset about career growth:

“With a skills-based approach, employees shift the focus from advancing vertically to understanding what they are missing to be ready for the next level: What are the experiences I need? What training do I need? What will make me ready for new opportunities? This approach helps them build their own flight plan.”

#2: Focus on the Most Urgent Use Cases

Skills-related changes only stick when they solve real business problems.

For Delta, the most urgent use case was talent development. Too frequently, identifying skills internally was difficult, leading to external searches for roles that could have been filled from within. By centering HR practices on skills, Delta expanded its internal talent pool, created more opportunities for upskilling and reskilling, and gave employees more visibility into their own career paths.

#3: Identify a Manageable Starting Point

Delta’s HR team took the lead on the initial work, starting with a concrete win: eliminating a college degree requirement for 94% of non-executive roles, which positively impacted talent acquisition results on the frontline where Delta was experiencing high attrition. The airline also created an apprenticeship program where employees can “earn while they learn” to advance internally.

As the program gained traction on the frontline, Delta turned its attention to a growing gap in digital and analytic skills. Delta’s team created a data analytics academy in partnership with Georgia State University, where employees could enter the analytics field without traditional education or cost barriers. Because there was executive buy-in and a significant impact on business outcomes, Delta established credibility for the skills-based model gradually and incrementally, setting a use case that could be expanded organization-wide over time.

#4: Integrate Compensation

Concurrent with building pathways for career advancement, Delta recognized that compensation had to keep pace. Leaders’ feedback to the compensation team was clear: many pay practices were not market-competitive. Delta was struggling to compete for highly skilled external talent and retain internal employees, especially in the technical ranks.

Engaging with Mercer in 2019, they worked to create a more agile, enterprise-wide job architecture. Delta moved away from a broad-banded pay-grade system toward a more flexible structure offering greater visibility into market data. Mercer’s extensive skills library, which embeds skills into job families and profiles, aided Delta’s team in building skills directly into their job architecture and compensation designs. Without this integration, job architecture, compensation, and career progression could have been at odds with the company’s new skills-based approach.

#5: Prioritize Communication and Change Enablement

Delta recognized that helping employees make new skills-centric connections required a multi-pronged communication approach. Working closely with key stakeholders to gain buy-in and validate the new job architecture and skills alignment, Delta established strong sponsorships for these organizational changes.

The rollout was done in two phases: first, facilitating conversations at leadership meetings and sharing information in high-level, bite-sized increments; second, creating videos and other communication vehicles describing how this work had impacted individuals. To avoid organizational overwhelm, sharing Delta's vision came first, with more details provided as the plan unfolded.

"We're now at a point of bringing all these pieces together and creating visibility. If we don't communicate broadly, then our employees are not going to understand what's in it for them, and I think some of the goodness would be lost." (Natalie Katz)

From an enablement perspective, Delta proactively equipped leaders to communicate the organizational benefits of its skills-first transformation. By providing leaders the confidence to discuss pay and career growth, Delta empowered both leaders and employees to take ownership of their career paths, shifting a team member's focus from limited job options to unlimited possibility.

#6: Plan for the Future & Continually Monitor Results

To project the skills needed to support Delta's organizational strategy, the airline created a Skills Governance Committee. During its quarterly meetings, the committee identifies critical skill gaps based on current and future business demands. Members review career sub-families at least once per year, ensuring the airline stays ahead of market and compensation forces.

Delta planned to leverage its Human Capital Management system to keep a pulse on the skills residing in the organization. With the help of AI, the airline hoped to analyze the resulting data to determine skills trends, and to drive focused learning and development programs that meet future company needs.

What Happened Next: Updates Since our 2024 Interview

Since we interviewed Delta in February of 2024, Delta's skills-first journey has continued to advance, and the results validate the investment. The following developments reflect where the program has evolved.

Delta Talent Hub Goes Enterprise-Wide

In 2024, Delta piloted the Delta Talent Hub across select business groups, including the HR organization. The platform, built on SAP SuccessFactors' Talent Intelligence Hub, created a single entry point where employees could understand their current skills, explore open roles matched to those skills, and access personalized learning recommendations. As of 2024, the Jobs Taxonomy tool mapped 482 requisite skills and proficiencies to 100% of Delta's roles.

In 2025, Delta launched Talent Hub enterprise-wide across all 100,000 employees. The platform was integrated into new-hire onboarding, performance management, and mid-year talent conversations. Usage of the Learning & Development component increased 15% over the prior year. The result: 78% of corporate and management jobs were filled with internal talent, and 32% of those openings were filled with talent from frontline roles.

By the Numbers (2025): 78% of corporate and management roles filled internally. 22,652 employees made lateral moves or were promoted. Attrition rate: 5%.

Skills as a Currency for Internal Mobility

Speaking at SAP SuccessConnect in 2024, Trevor Greer, Delta's Solutions Partner for Talent, described how the airline re-imagined skills not as a credential, but as currency. "Skills are really meant to be a currency that is for employees who want to move throughout the company," Greer said. "They can develop their skills and take it with them, so that way they can build out a robust portfolio and then use those skills to drive their own career growth."

The taxonomy now encompasses approximately 500 skills, co-validated with senior leaders, subject matter experts, and employees across all levels of the organization. Delta also implemented skill-based hiring assessments and interview guides for 100% of scale, merit, individual contributor, and frontline leader roles, with all candidates required to take an assessment before being considered.

AI Accelerates the Skills Architecture

Delta has also leaned into AI to maintain and evolve its skills infrastructure. Alongside SAP's Skills Ontology, which covers more than 30,000 skills across global industries, Delta developed its own Attributes Library using natural language processing. This allows the airline to harvest skills definitions from its own operations, training employees in the language Delta people actually use. AI tooling also supports hiring managers in tracking requisitions and keeping skills current in the system.

Recognition followed. SAP recognized Delta with a 2025 Innovation Award for its implementation of the Opportunity Marketplace and Talent Intelligence Hub, citing a nearly 50% internal fill rate for managerial roles as a key outcome.

Propel Program Expands Career Pathways

Delta's Propel Career Path Program, originally launched in 2018 to address barriers to entry in the pilot profession, was expanded significantly. By 2025, Propel offered structured pathways for employees seeking careers as pilots, aircraft maintenance technicians, ground maintenance mechanics, and flight dispatchers. Employees selected for Propel receive a multi-year leave of absence, a financial scholarship, loan interest coverage, mentorship, and a streamlined path to their new role. Propel selected its first class of ground maintenance mechanics and dispatchers in spring 2026.

The Lesson for Other Organizations

Delta's post-2024 journey reinforces a core insight from its original skills-first work: infrastructure without adoption is inert. The Talent Hub only delivered value once it was integrated into the everyday rhythms of the business: onboarding, performance reviews, and talent conversations. The skills taxonomy only became a currency when employees and leaders learned to spend it. And the governance structure, a quarterly Skills Governance Committee that adds, removes, and validates skills, is what keeps the whole system from going stale.

For organizations earlier in this journey, Delta's trajectory offers a clear lesson: the technical build is necessary but not sufficient. The real work is cultural, and it never fully stops.

Summary

The ongoing evolution of automation and AI technologies is fundamentally reshaping work. In their 27th Annual Global CEO Survey, PwC found that 97% of CEOs have taken steps to change how they are creating, delivering, and capturing value over the past five years, with nearly half questioning their companies' 10-year viability.

To stay agile and relevant, businesses must deconstruct conventional organizational and job structures, opting for flexible models that respond swiftly to market demands. This means adopting skills-based job architectures, fostering personalized career paths, and integrating targeted learning opportunities. Futureproofing the workforce is now a business necessity.

Delta's focus on business outcomes as the foundation for its skills-first approach is a testament to the benefits of embracing the reskilling revolution. The airline's proactive approach began with dismantling traditional hierarchical structures and embracing a dynamic, skills-centric job model aligning workforce capabilities with business objectives.

Delta Air Lines' journey to becoming a skills-based organization serves as an inspiring and pragmatic guide for companies navigating this transformative era. Their learnings and insights will help businesses fly more smoothly into the world's new skills economy.