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Comparing Durable vs Perishable Skills and Training Considerations

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There are many ways to describe skills. Professional skills, leadership skills, and occupational or technical skills are just a few. Then there are “soft” skills – skills which are universal and not associated with a particular job or industry, such as communications and collaboration. And “hard” skills – skills related to technical abilities typically acquired through formal education, such as coding or product knowledge. The training required for each of these can vary greatly.



All of these descriptions are useful. But none contemplate the important factor of **permanence**. It's no secret that some very important skills are necessary today and that they will become obsolete within a few years. Many technology or product-related skills will need to be replaced over time as technologies and products evolve. Here's how to balance *durable* and *perishable* skills in your workforce.

Understanding Durable and Perishable Skills

We all know that some skills are long-lasting while others are most relevant at a particular point in time. In recent years, human resources and learning think tanks, consultants, and practitioners have started to quantify this by discussing the half-life of skills. There's general agreement that most skills have a “half-life” of about five years, with the more technical and product-related skills coming in at two and a half years. Which means, many of today's essential-yet-perishable technical and product-related skills will be obsolete in five years.

According to [Chief Learning Officer](#) (CLO) magazine, skill durability can be divided into three categories:

1. **Durable skills:** Half-life of more than 7.5 years. They constitute a base layer of mindsets and dispositions.
2. **Semi-durable skills:** Half-life of 2.5 to 7.5 years. These tend to be those

frameworks that are based on an understanding that may remain relevant for a few years.

3. **Perishable skills:** Half-life of less than 2.5 years. These are specific technical skills – especially those related to specific vendors, platforms, or programming languages – that must be updated frequently.

Here are a few examples of each:

- **Durable skills:** Design thinking, project management practices, effective communication, leadership.
- **Semi-durable skills:** The ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) process used for designing and developing learning content or Scrum software development framework.
- **Perishable skills:** Organization-specific policies and tools as well as specific programming languages or technology applications.

Why Are We Talking About Durable Skills Now?

The concept of durable and perishable skills has caught on as employers around the world recognize a talent shortage and a need to develop the skills of current employees, not simply rely on hiring skilled talent. Though there's natural urgency to develop the skills that employees – and companies – need right now, we're also realizing that many of those "right now" skills are less valuable two years from now.

As new technologies emerge, for example, the ability to use that new tech becomes the next, new urgent skill requirement – and the previously urgent skillset becomes a waning commodity. Companies want their employees to have broader value (and employees want the same thing): to have other, less perishable skills and competencies that translate into career and company success for the long haul.

The [World Economic Forum's \(WEF\) 2020 Job report](#) identifies the emergence of seven key professional clusters. According to the report, "The highest-demand skills required in these emerging professional clusters span both technical and cross-functional skills." The future of work will continue to include disruptive technical skills, specialized industry skills, and core business skills.

In the report, the WEF cautions, "The type of opportunities that are set to materialize are also changing fast, in tandem with the evolving needs of the technological and economic context—demanding pragmatic and effective mechanisms to support workers' transitions to the new opportunities that lie ahead."

It's clear that professionals and businesses will need to be intentional about hiring and training for the skills that both meet the newest evolving need and last beyond the next new thing.

How to Balance Durable and Perishable Skills

In its published research insight, [The Enterprise Guide for Closing the Skills Gap](#), IBM emphasizes the importance of considering just how transferable a given set of skills really is. [IBM urges](#) business leaders and learners to follow a skills framework that can adapt to changing business needs. The company recommends starting by thinking about these emerging questions:

- Are skills more durable or more perishable?
- Are skills transferable across roles, job families, or industries?
- Are skills in demand right now, and will they be so in the future?

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To close your organization's skills gaps in the short-term and for the long run, identify which skills and competencies are perishable, semi-durable, and durable. Ideally, you'll have a flexible competency management system such as Avilar's [WebMentor Skills™](#), that can help you tag which category your skills fall into. Set up a process and schedule to revisit and, if necessary, revise the skills and competencies in your model. Check your perishable skills at least annually, to be sure your competency model – and your workforce skills and training – stay fresh and relevant. Then, keep your learning and development program and individual development plans aligned with the skills your company (really) needs now and for the future.

Ready to think about how to identify and manage your durable and perishable skills and competencies? [Contact us](#) to find out how Avilar's [WebMentor Skills™](#) can support your efforts.