



# Is Your Program Aligning Working Adult Learners with Skills in High Demand?

Lisa McIntyre-Hite, PhD. and Matthew J. Daniel

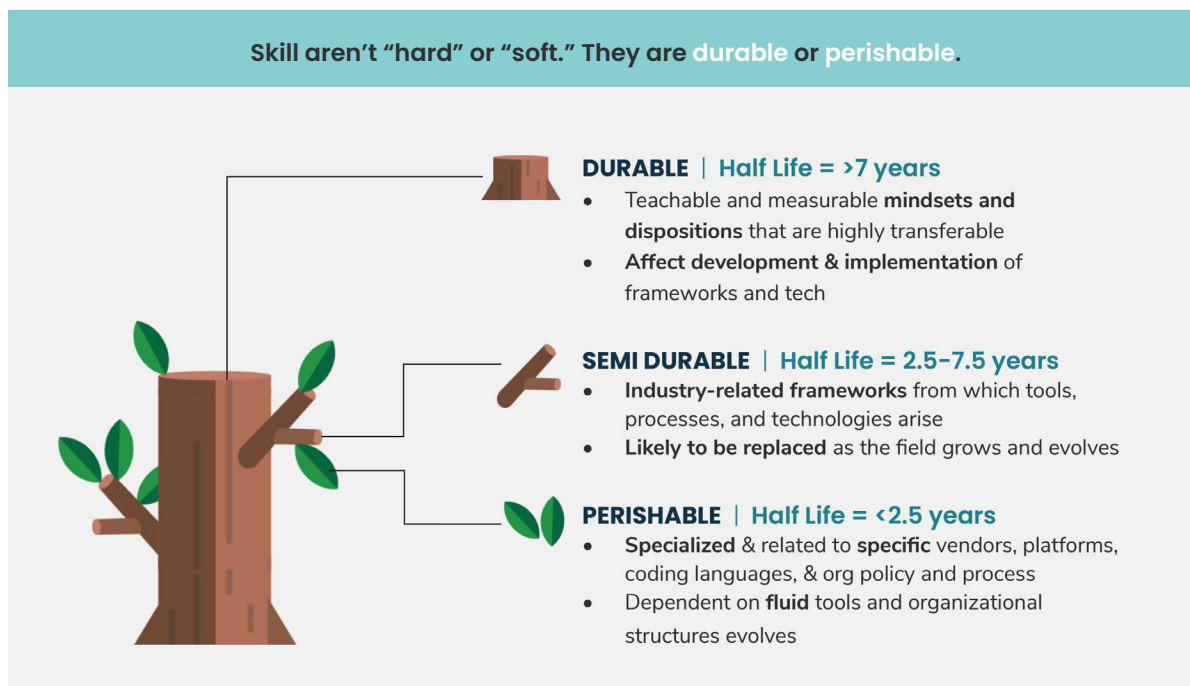
Contributors: Alex Cannon, Darcy Monaghan, Chacha Widodo

**More Fortune 1000 companies are adopting education benefit policies to enable their employees to pursue a debt-free education. Savvy academic institutions will seek to better understand what skills gaps these employers aspire to meet so they can better prepare students for in-demand jobs and upward mobility. Lisa McIntyre-Hite and Matthew Daniel presented the following concepts in a July, 2021 [webinar in partnership with Inside Higher Education](#).**

## Think of skills in terms of their durability.

The concept of 'hard' and 'soft' skills is often intended to demarcate skills that are either quantifiable (hard) or interpersonal (soft). As a framework, this isn't particularly useful for a number of reasons, chief among them is a failure to acknowledge the critical interplay between skill types. In today's knowledge economy—which relies on lifelong learning to keep pace with new ideas, technologies, and innovations—understanding how skills relate and build from one another is essential.

When we think of skills as **durable** or **perishable**, we begin to see how skills interrelate. This framework can be thought of as a **tree**. Durable skills (the trunk) are those with the most staying power. They represent the teachable, measurable mindsets and dispositions, such as communication and agility, that are highly transferable across roles. They are the grounding force for the tree and the learner, year after year. From durable skills stem semi-durable skills (the branches), which represent industry-level knowledge and frameworks, from which specific processes, tools, and tech arise. They die off every few years when they no longer add value to the tree. Perishable skills (the leaves) are specialized and relate to specific policies, processes, and platforms, such as coding languages. These often die off year after year and need to be replenished to keep the tree and the learner healthy.



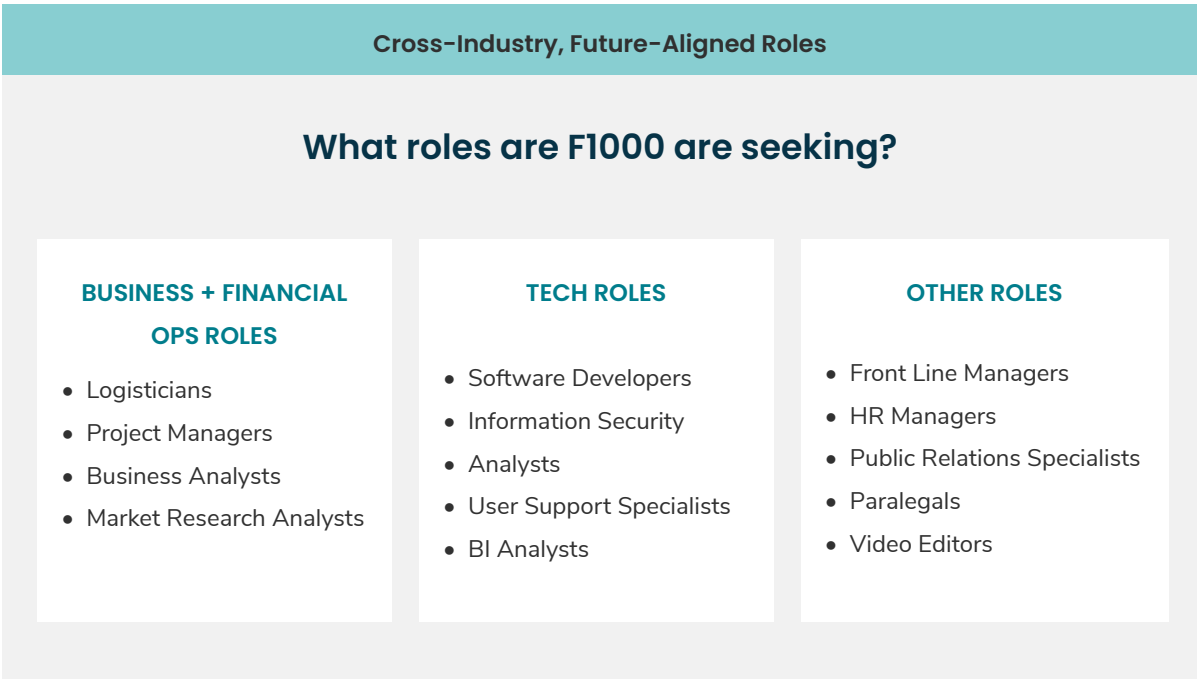
No skill type carries more value than others; all are important for career advancement. **The danger is in over-indexing on a single type.** For example, while knowing a variety of platforms and coding languages (perishable) may be valuable to a software engineer, advancement to a leadership position within the engineering team is not feasible without also having the ability to communicate well cross-functionally (durable). Similarly, a manager leading a team in a rapidly growing company will need to be agile (durable), as well as knowledgeable about specific industry frameworks (semi-durable) and organizational policies designed to help the company scale responsibly (perishable).

Companies focus a tremendous amount of time and resources on generating content and courses to support policy, system, and process changes (perishable) and often look to outside providers as partners to establish the frameworks and dispositions in their staff members to deliver on long-term business goals.

# Durable skills are the common denominator among high-demand, future-aligned roles that traverse multiple industries.

Guild aggregated data from a number of resources, including stakeholder interviews from Fortune 1000 companies from over a dozen industries to better understand what gaps employers are seeking to fill. We asked these employers what they anticipate their needs will be post-pandemic, and how that may change current roles. While some industries have highly specialized needs, like healthcare and manufacturing, **what we found was a high level of overlap and ubiquity in the need for durable skills across roles in demand.**

Below is a directional (not comprehensive) snapshot of roles that are in high demand across 10+ industries with companies that have adopted education benefit policies. Durable skills are vital to each of these roles, and in turn, each of these roles are in demand in multiple industries.



Helping working adult students understand the high transferability of the durable skills they gain from degree and credential programs will help them see the number of doors education attainment can help them unlock. Going a step further and helping them highlight and communicate that they have these skills to current and future employers will help them clearly demonstrate their alignment with employer skills gaps.

**70%**  
of working adult students say career advancement is a main driver for their decision to pursue a degree or credential.

Source: Guild survey data

The fact that durable skills are foundational doesn't mean they are worth more than semi-durable or perishable skills, which are crucial for career advancement. Due to their highly specialized nature, perishable skills may sometimes be easier to spot and resolve, and this can make it easy to fixate on them. For example, a sales associate in need of stronger presentation skills may have a more challenging skills gap to resolve than a new sales associate who is unfamiliar with Salesforce, even though ultimately both skills are essential to the role.

## Working adult students want transferable skills and upward mobility.

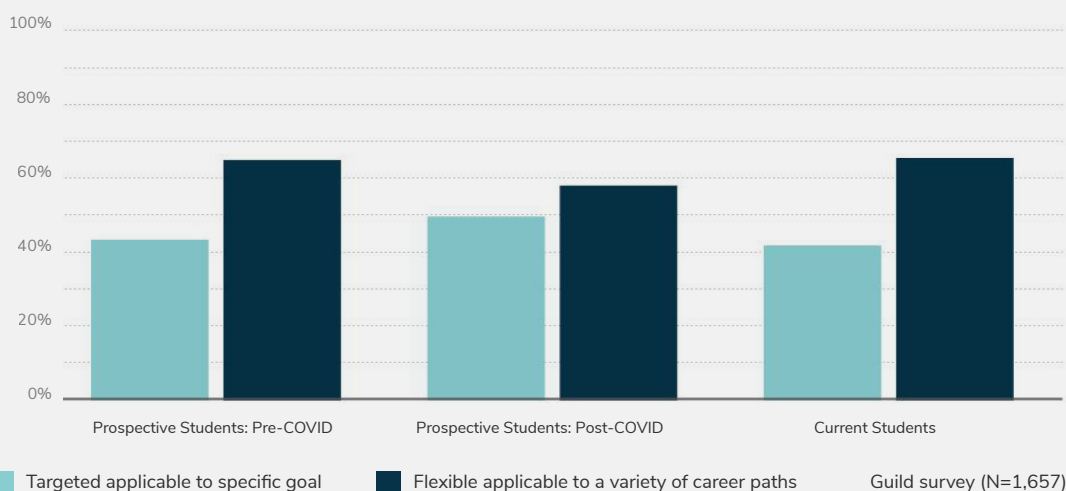
"Basically, I'd like to get into leadership. It's a goal of mine to be a leader... I don't really know what that looks like yet... I'm trying to grow myself as a human being."

-Guild student Chris on deciding to pursue an MBA

Working adult students also value durable skills. Guild surveys of over 1600 current and prospective students show that working adult learners want upward mobility and value credentials that are applicable to a variety of career paths instead of a single, targeted goal. When we compare pre-and post-COVID survey data, we see an uptick in the number

of students who value targeted applicability, but we also know that this can change over time: as students enroll in programs and begin to recognize that their skills are in demand in multiple industries, the emphasis on a targeted pathway can shift away in kind. Similarly, valuing skills that are highly transferable across fields doesn't mean career advancement isn't a priority. In fact, in a recent Guild survey **"advancing my career" was the top motivator** driving working adults back to school.

### Which of the following criteria is most valuable to you in a degree/certificate programs?



### 3 ways to improve outcomes for working adult students

Institutions committed to serving more working adult students care about student career outcomes. In June, 2021, UPCEA released the results of a [persistence and retention survey](#), in which 66 individuals representing 22 academic institutions were asked to rank how important student enrollment, satisfaction, persistence, and grad / alumni career outcomes were to institutional leadership. Enrollment was the undisputed winner, with 91% of respondents identifying this as extremely important. Grad / alumni career outcomes came in last place, with 32% indicating it was extremely important, and a further 5% identifying it as “not very important.” When force ranked, 0% said career outcomes were the most important.

Ultimately, institutions that dedicate the time and resources to invest in the structure, services, talent, and delivery that best support working adults will successfully serve more working adults. The knowledge that the majority of working adult students use their education benefit for career advancement creates a moral imperative for us as an ecosystem to prioritize student career outcomes. In this section we explore three crucial ways academic institutions can approach this through applying what we now know about skills in demand.

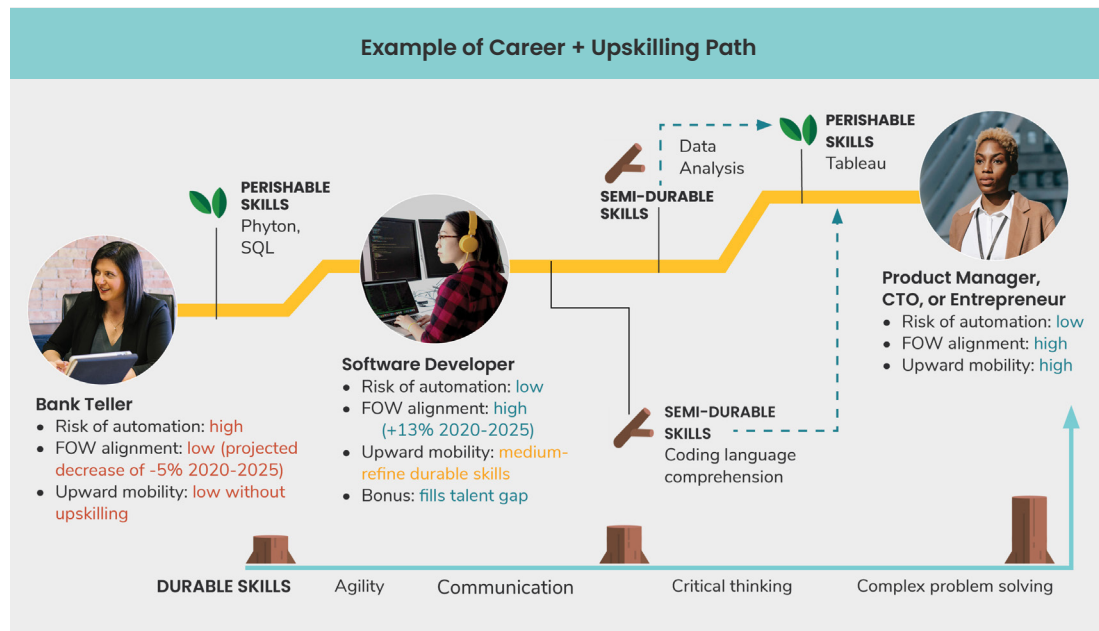
1

#### **Embrace the mutual inclusivity of working and learning.**

Driving better outcomes for working adult students means innovating at the nexus between the traditional education reality, in which degrees and credentials are critical for economic mobility, and the traditional workforce reality, which necessitates continuous skills development. Successful, innovative approaches will incorporate stackability and interoperability. Prioritizing stackability ensures that all learning counts. Students gain competencies that are immediately applicable and ultimately “stackable” into specific credentials or a degree. Stackability also accounts for another critical type of flexibility that working adult students need: the ability to self-pace their learning journeys. Finally, paying attention to both employer and student demand fosters interoperability, or value alignment for both students and employers. Interoperability can be a throughline into economic mobility.

To explore the necessity of stackability and interoperability in the future of work, we can look to the financial services industry as an example. As financial services become increasingly digitized, roles that were historically safe, such as bank tellers, are at high risk of becoming automated. Smart employers are turning that risk into an opportunity to upskill their frontline talent and fill their most in-demand jobs—in this instance, roles like developers and cybersecurity specialists. Frontline employees are also eager to use their education benefits to acquire in-demand skills that can equip them for upward mobility.

Below is an example career path bolstered by education for a current bank teller at an employer that has taken a thoughtful approach to strategic hiring needs.



In this instance, the perishable skills (denoted by leaves) comprise critical competencies needed to make the jump from a role with high risk of automation and low future of work alignment (the number of bank teller roles open is expected to decrease 5% by 2025) to software developer, a role with low risk of automation and high future of work alignment (with job openings expected to increase 13% in the same time frame). Underpinning these perishable skills are the durable skills that can grow over time and lead to outcomes beyond a single promotion. In this example, learning Python and SQL—and possessing the agility to do it—helps a student take a critical step into a new in-demand role. Over time, as the student takes on more learning opportunities through her work experience and her education benefit. She earns stackable credentials which can build into a relevant degree, and because work and learning are not exclusive experiences, she can be certain she's building toward the competency requirements for an ultimate career goal.





2

## Translate in-demand skills into measurable course outcomes and authentic assessments that serve as evidence of learners' competencies.

Setting expectations around the ability to communicate new and strengthening durable skills is important, but we can't stop at pointing out where course competencies and skills in demand overlap. To truly drive better outcomes for working adult students, course outcomes must intentionally align with skills in high demand, and these outcomes, or competencies, must also be measurable. Once the competencies are identified, students must have the opportunity to show that they can demonstrate the skills needed on the job.



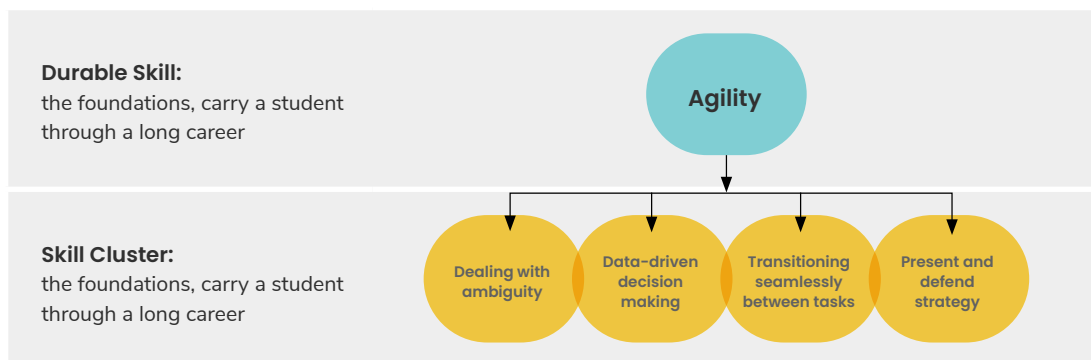
The below example looks at competencies that indicate agility —a durable skill. Those specific competencies are data-driven decision making and persuasively presenting a strategy. By designing backwards from these competencies, academics can designate proof points that would demonstrate mastery of these skills, including summative knowledge of them as well as the ability to demonstrate them in practice.

<b>Measurable course outcome:</b>	 Use data to prioritize and adjust project plans and deliverables.	 Present information clearly and concisely
<b>How to connect the dots &amp; communicate competencies developed:</b>	"These are <b>durable skills</b> that employers value long term and will help students make and defend strategic, data-driven business decisions"	
<b>Proof Points</b>	<b>Summative Assessment:</b> Work-aligned assessments and clear rubrics help students make connections between assessments, skills development, and how it translates on the job. Case study and presentation defending prioritization and adjustments.	<b>Formative Assessment &amp; Activities</b> Low-stakes; high-feedback opportunities to practice the competency  <b>Discussion:</b> Defending a change in plans  <b>Quiz:</b> Analyzing data using Tableau

3

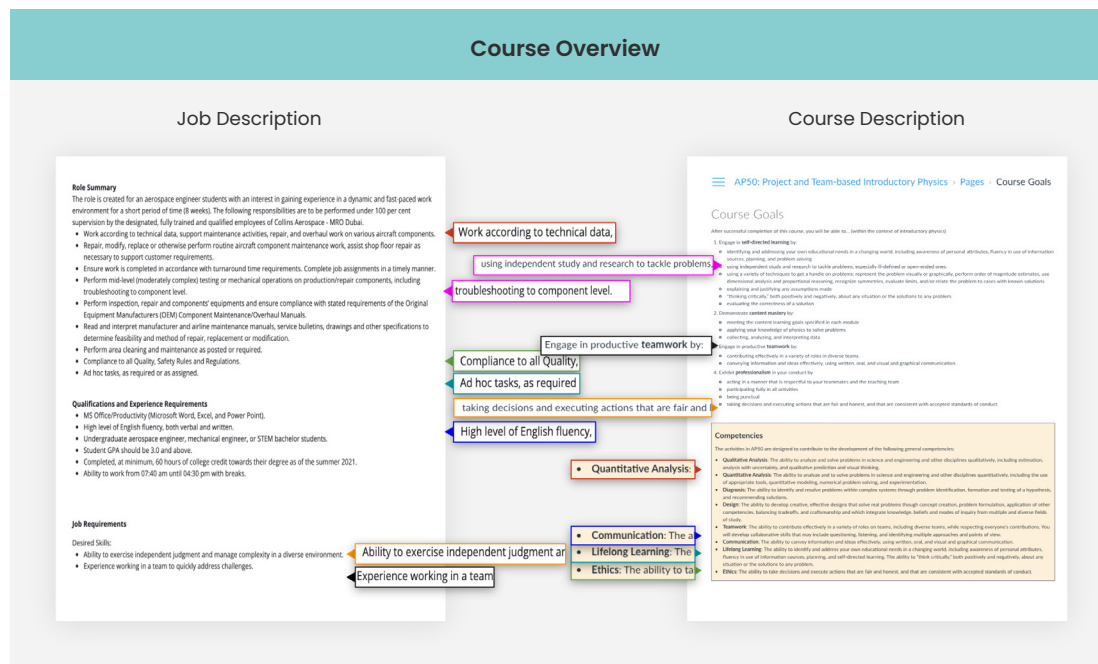
## Help students understand and articulate the value of their skills.

Given durable skills are present across high demand roles in a number of industries, academic institutions can help working adult students be more competitive in the job market by helping students clearly articulate what their durable skills are. By virtue of their versatility, durable skills can be particularly challenging to put into words. Employers may look for durable skills through asking specific questions about competencies that would indicate mastery of a durable skill. For example, Emsi has identified agility as a forerunner in high-demand skills. Employers value agile employees for their ability to adjust the scope of their work or team strategy as business needs change. To gage agility, an employer may look at a skill cluster and ask for examples of data-driven decision making or transitioning task switching. The more concrete examples a student has to represent their abilities in this area, the better off they will be.



The versatility of durable skills also means that the name of the degree students earn may not always mirror the job titles they aspire to have. This is also true in many instances at the individual course level. Bringing the durable skills conversation into the classroom therefore requires a direct approach. Applying a straightforward methodology, such as Wiggins and McTighe's backwards design approach (explained here by Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching), level sets student expectations from day one around what they will do and learn. This also sets the stage for students to begin thinking about how they can communicate the competencies they gain from an individual course.

In the example below, an engineering job description is juxtaposed with a Harvard physics course description. The professor breaks out key competencies, and we can see how these can apply to a role in another field. Sharing an example like this in the classroom can help illustrate the importance of connecting the dots between what an employer is indicating around skills gaps, and how a student's individual competencies can fill them.



## Conclusion:

Durable skills align with the needs of working adult students and employers. While semi-durable and perishable skills are necessary for career advancement, having a solid foundation of durable skills enables students to apply their knowledge across industries and flex into a variety of job types so they mitigate the risk of their skillset becoming obsolete and can instead pivot into meaningful, fulfilling careers. They will have the capacity to continue learning the new, necessary perishable skills to supplement the continuously growing base of durable and perishable skills gained.