

SKILLS-FIRST: ARE WE THERE YET?



► Why skills-first, why now?

These are placing unprecedented demands on workforce agility:



Most workforce development systems remain anchored in **qualification-centric practices**

100M
workers underemployed due to skills mismatch*



Pre-2000s

Qualification-centric systems

2000s–present

Skills-based hybrids

Emerging

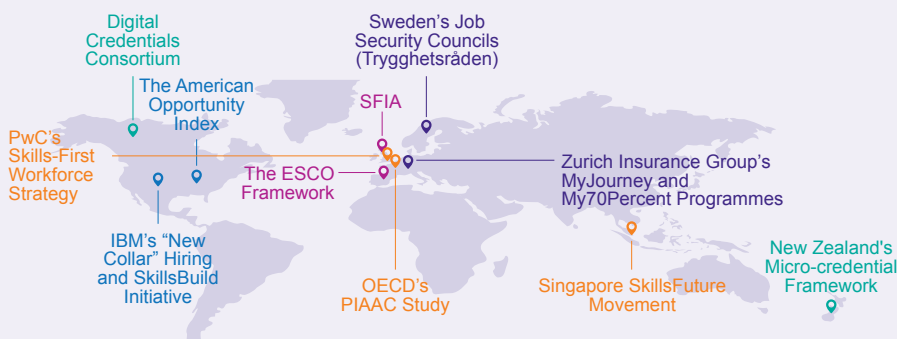
Skills-first models

Skills are the new currency of the labour market

► Defining the skills-first paradigm shift

A skills-first approach represents a distinct orientation that consciously prioritises the identification (or articulation), acquisition, demonstration, and use of skills as the central aims of workforce development—including recruitment, job design, learning and career advancement.

► Examples of skills-first interventions



- Addressing Signalling Failures: Verification Mechanisms and Skills Currencies
- Addressing Coordination Deficits: Harmonisation Initiatives and Shared Languages
- Addressing Risk Asymmetry: Cost-Sharing Models and Transition Support
- Addressing Measurement Gaps: Productivity Frameworks and Skills Valuation
- Addressing Cultural Resistance: Embracing Skills Signaling and Skills Pathways

► What's holding us back?

The five systemic barriers:



*World Economic Forum (2024)

TOWARDS A SKILLS-FIRST ECOSYSTEM: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

A skills-first ecosystem is more than just a collection of programmes, tools or frameworks. It is a cohesive system where clearly defined skills and levels of proficiency drive labour market signalling, mobility, productivity, and broader societal value. Building such an ecosystem requires a shared sense of responsibility among all stakeholders.

Critical Questions for a Skills-First Transition

- What assumptions and practices must be re-evaluated in your domain to make skills-first practices viable?
- What interdependencies with other actors must be understood and addressed?
- What risks are you willing to take—and what forms of institutional support do you require—to turn aspiration into action?



◀ Scan to view the full working paper

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