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Learn. To Change.

The buyer's guide for AI & cloud skills development

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Contents

Find the right vendor that empowers your business to achieve digital transformation, unlock the power of AI, and deliver immediate value.

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Introduction

Advanced technology skills are more in demand than ever. 79% of leaders say they don't have the right skills to get the job done — and hiring isn't always a viable option because of increased demand for skillsets in AI and machine learningrelated job roles.

As one leader put it, "I fully expect I won't be able to find the talent I want. And if I do, I won't be able to afford it."

The situation is even tougher with emerging technologies like AI. 60% of executives estimate their workforce will require some level of proficiency with developing AI or using AI-powered tools – but AI technologies are so new, and have so many dependencies, that it's tough to find, hire, or upskill in these areas.

The solution? Upskilling, re-skilling, and training staff with a software provider that offers cloud and AI skills training.

But what is technology skills development, what does the buying process look like, and how do you choose the right vendor?

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What is technology skills development software?

When considering training, upskilling, or reskilling staff for the cloud and related technologies, there are several options available.

Buyers will quickly find that available options tend to fall into the following categories.

→ Vendor-provided training

For instance, Microsoft offers "Microsoft Learn for Azure" and Amazon provides "AWS Skill Builder." While the training is managed by the actual cloud service providers, it lacks in a couple of key areas.

Firstly, it does not cover training on multi-cloud, which is the strategic direction for 90% or more of large companies for security, availability, and other reasons.

Secondly, cloud providers are not specialists in training, have limited platform features and lab and which is why many cloud providers recommend using a skills development vendor.

These vendors can typically keep up with their own AI and machine learning content, but don't always contextualize how to use their tools in the wild or in conjunction with other AI tools.

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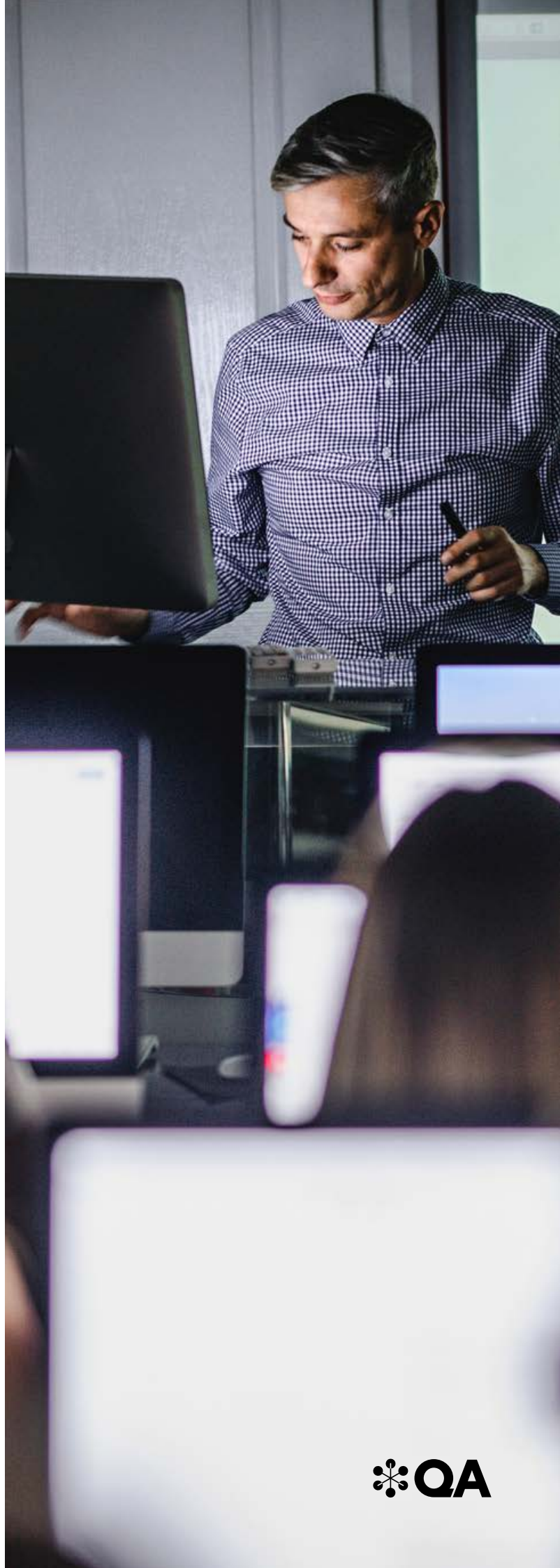
📖 E-learning providers

E-learning and online course providers advertise "a little bit for everyone," including some courses on the cloud and AI.

While e-learning can be tempting, as your company may already have a subscription to a vendor, two significant issues pose a threat to training success.

- E-learning providers tend to have spotty, incomplete, and/or outdated coverage of cloud and AI topics. (With AWS advertising updates daily and GCP every 1-3 days, it's absolutely critical that staff stay current in the environment and with tools they will be using).

- E-learning course completion is often an abysmal 5%-20% – what's the point of offering cloud training courses when staff don't utilise and complete them?

🖥️ Virtual instructor-led training

Virtual instructor-led training is highly effective for remote learning, providing participants with the flexibility to access training from any location, fostering inclusivity and accommodating diverse schedules.

However, it may fall short in replicating the hands-on, interactive nature of in-person training, potentially leading to diminished engagement and a lack of practical, real-world application.
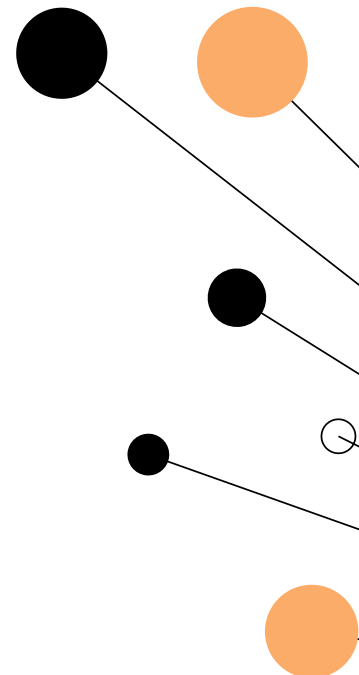
🖥️ Skill development software

Unlike e-learning vendors, skill development vendors are specialists in the emerging tech, offer deep learning, and keep courses and certification preparation up-to-date for an 80% course completion rate on average.

Plus, a skills development software will provide the technology platform and training content required to baseline current skill levels, develop the right skills needed for a certain job, and validate that skills are practical (not theoretical) by testing them in real-world environments.

The right skill development software will also provide blended learning opportunities, where self-paced learning and virtual classrooms come together to create a hyper-engaging learning environment.

AI & cloud skill development software is the best choice for any organisation looking for job readiness and preparedness for cloud initiatives; the other options simply fall short when it comes to driving the adoption of training and validating real-world cloud skills.

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A technology skill development
vendor typically has a certain set of
core features:

- **Courses and learning paths:**
  These are the video and written training content that help users prepare for job roles, certifications, and more. The amount of content varies from vendor to vendor, so it's important to make sure the type and depth of training fit your needs.

- **Hands-on labs:**
  Labs are critical for validating that a team member can successfully use a new skill in the real world. The best vendors provide guided labs and lab challenges (plus knowledge checks) to verify each lab step was completed correctly.

- **Career pathing & training assignments:** Leading vendors equip managers with the tools to set career goals (or other goals, like onboarding). Then, they can assign team members bespoke training based on those goals.

- **Content customisation:**
  It's important to be able to modify existing training content or to build your own. With bespoke options, you can easily add a PDF or video to explain the purpose of the training, or supplement vendor-provided learning paths with your own training.

- **Analytics:**
  Good analytics provide a snapshot of the skill profile within your company, teams, and individual users. Analytics are often provided as visual dashboards and downloadable exports that provide data on skill growth.

- **Other enterprise features:**
  These may include single sign-on, API integrations, white labelling, and more. Altogether, enterprise features let you holistically manage learning within your organisation and access the data you need.

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Key players
in the buying process

Nearly every purchase decision requires a buyer group: a number of stakeholders who need to approve or agree with your purchase recommendation. It's helpful to define stakeholders at the beginning and keep them involved. That way, you can define vendor requirements at the outset and make a collective choice at the end.

A typical buying group usually includes these stakeholders:

1. **Tech leader or team manager.** This person, or the HR representative, may lead the search for a vendor.

2. **HR Learning & Development Head.** This person, or the tech leader, may lead the search for a vendor.

3. **User group.** These are the learners who will use the platform.

4. **Executive or Senior Leadership.** This is the budget holder who must sign off on the decision for a vendor.

In most cases, a few additional stakeholders are included to support the purchase recommendation. This could include procurement teams, the legal team, and the security team. Each of these groups may require specific documentation, like Master Agreements, Risk Assessments, and Security Questionnaires.

Getting these requirements up-front makes it easier to identify the vendor who can meet all of your organisation's needs, and it provides a better sense of the purchase timeline.

Tip

If you have many users on a platform, you'll especially benefit from two key features: automation and adaptiveness.

With automation, you can set a training programme on autopilot, reducing the need to manually manage new users or manually progress users through their training.

With adaptiveness, the platform automatically adjusts to the user's skill level. Adaptive or "smart" assessments become easier or harder based on the user's response and pinpoint their skill level. Plus, adaptive training programmes "skip" past content that users test out of to focus on the content they need to learn.

What to expect in the buying process

For most, the purchase process has a few defined steps. Let's walk through what to expect in each of them.

01	Agree on the problem
02	Identify vendor candidates
03	Request a demo
04	Engage in a pilot
05	Finalise the purchase

Tip

This is the best time to create a vendor evaluation plan. By defining your requirements — what features and content are needed to meet your business goals — it'll be much easier to select the top contender.

For a sample vendor evaluation plan, see the last page of the ebook.

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01

Agree on
the problem

What are your tech talent needs —
and what happens if you aren't able to
upskill and train to fill key job roles?

Ask the stakeholders within your organisation
what the critical needs are. There may
be specific requirements around cloud
adoption, technology efforts, workforce
transformation, digital modernisation, or
something else.

Additionally, there may be a need for talent
acquisition (e.g., the ability to do a pre-
hire skills assessment for new applicants)
or talent retention (e.g., tools to improve
retention of senior developers).

02

Identify vendor
candidates

Many begin the purchase process
with a quick search online to define
the landscape and see what potential
solutions are available.

This is a great time to identify potential
vendors who provide cloud and technology
skill development.

Based on your vendor evaluation plan (see
the sample worksheet at the end), you can
then create a list of vendors to engage.

03

Request
a demo

Ask your top choices for a demo of
their solution.

In many cases, a salesperson will have a short
conversation around your specific needs
(see step 1) in order to better tailor the demo
to your requirements.

Ask for deep dives into your needs.
For example, see what tailoring and
customisation options are available to modify
training for your tech stack.

Get a good look at skills analytics and
reporting. Check out labs, paying close
attention to how quick it is to spin up an
environment and whether there are seamless
lab checks to validate steps are being
followed.

☼ Tip

Invite all key stakeholders to the demo.
This may include your buyer's group, team
managers from all applicable departments,
and some end users.

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04

Engage in a pilot (Optional)

If you want to see the solution in action, ask for a pilot.

This usually comes in the form of a 14-day "free trial" during which you can add users and assign training. The objective of the "pilot" or "free trial" is to find out whether or not the vendor meets the needs you outlined in step 1— so it's important to set up success criteria.

✧ Tip

A pilot or "free trial" is a relatively short period of time. Focus on making sure key features meet your needs (e.g., you can measure skill growth, not just content consumption) and that key content is available (e.g., deep dives into your cloud provider).

If it does, recommend the solution to your buying group, and then proceed to the next purchase step.

05

Finalise the purchase.

As a final step, your vendor may need to go through reviews with procurement, legal, and security teams.

This stage can take days or months, depending on your organisation. However, you may be able to speed up the process by providing your vendor with all required paperwork (such as Master Agreements, Risk Assessments, and Security Questionnaires) at the beginning of the purchase process when asking for a demo.

Once the final stakeholder has signed off, celebrate! You can look forward to implementing your cloud and AI skills development solution and seeing positive results from the training and upskilling program.

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Narrowing down your decision

When considering multiple vendors, it can be difficult to nail down a decision.

Be sure to ask hard questions, and don't make assumptions. By fully exploring each vendor, you can understand whether the vendor will truly support your skill development goals.

- **Reputation.**
  What is the vendor's reputation among your peers? How do they match up on directories such as G2, which compare similar vendors side-by-side? To dig in, use the G2 Filter by "user type" to look for administrator's reviews, where you'll read about favorite features and missing functionalities. You can also filter by Users to see whether the user experience is strong, since a good user experience impacts training completion and adoption.

- **Core features.**
  Really dig into the core features. Take time to understand what's marketing lingo and what the platform actually delivers value-wise. Consider questions like:

- **Do their assessments measure knowledge exclusively, or do they measure on-the-job skills?**
  Does the vendor have assessments available for pre-employment tests to better screen tech candidates? Are there "smart" or "adaptive" features to save time on test-taking?

- **What kind of labs are available — and how seamless is the interface and ability to check step completion in the labs?**
  Are there guided labs, lab challenges, lab playgrounds, and the ability to build my own?

- **Can I build my own content?**
  Can I tailor training by remixing learning paths or adding videos and PDFs?

- **How do I make sure my learners are engaged?**
  Are there nudges to remind users who are falling behind? Does the vendor have leaderboards to gamify learning, inspire friendly competition, and reward high performers?

- **Who makes the content on the vendor's site?** Is there an in-house team to ensure content is consistent and up-to-date? Are there content repeats that could confuse the learners? How does the vendor check for quality control and validate learning growth?

- **Support and success services.**
  Ask about the level of support and success the vendor offers — because even the most intuitive solutions often require some setup to really deliver the right value and training to your teams.

- **Content.**
  Does your vendor use an in-house content team to ensure all training material is up-to-date and meets high standards of quality control? If not, you might see outdated content or duplicate content (such as multiple DevOps courses covering the same content) which will confuse your learners and slow down their skill acquisition. Look for strong quality control, and also ask how they manage certification preparation (such as support through office hours).

- **Modalities**
  Does your vendor offer self-paced and instructor-led learning? Or just elearning? Or just virtual instructor-led training? Be sure you have the right training types to meet your needs – usually, it's safest if all types are available.

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What about pricing and add-ons?

In most cases, vendors charge on a per-user basis. Most require a contract for at least a year, and some offer discounts or incentives for multi-year contracts.

Don't forget to ask if customer success, implementation, and other specific features are included in the solution's base price. These extras can impact not only the cost of the solution but also the quality of your experience.

For example, a vendor that includes customer success prioritises your experience and your team's successful training and upskilling.

However, if a vendor charges extra for customer success, they might not place a high level of importance on your company, your success, and your ability to train well.

☼ Tip

Got a revolving door of potential users?

Ask about license reassignment. Some vendors let you reassign a license or "seat" from one user to another, while others don't.

Worksheet: Revealing the Top Pick

Need some help crafting a vendor evaluation plan? We get it.
Check out the sample evaluation plan below. Use the blank spaces to write in additional or alternative requirements.

Content - Topics

Cloud

DevOps

Cybersecurity

Other (Programming, AI/ML, DevOps, etc)

Programming

AI & Machine Learning

Certification Prep

Content Modalities

Self-Paced eLearning

Blended Learning

Instructor-led training (virtual, in-person, etc.)

Other (Gamification, etc.)

Content - Topics

Pre-hire assessment to test the skills of candidates

Hands-on labs, preferably with validation checks to verify each step was done right

Career Paths for defining job roles and required skills

Assessments to baseline skill levels

Training programmes to upskill (preferably adaptive or "smart")

Other

Administrator Features

Skill profiles at the organisation, team, and individual levels

Tailor and customise learning paths

Single Sign-On

Analytics and reports with a skill focus (not just consumption-focused)

Content creation to make or add additional content

Other

Reputation among users and administrators

User reputation (check reviews in places like G2)

Enterprise manager reputation (ask your network)

Pricing

(cost per user) x   (number of users) =   (total cost)

Additional fees for features or services (if none, write 0)

Additional fees for features or services (if none, write 0)

Grand Total

Ready to start your search?

QA's self-paced learning platform is designed to give organisations hands-on learning on cloud platforms, AI tools, DevOps, software development, and more.

Our customers can help teams benchmark their skills, customise their learning journey, and apply their learning in simulated environments.

See how we can help your team learn, master, and apply new technologies to meet your organisation's needs.

Contact us to learn more

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