

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision makers--people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

What are the fastest growing skills needed in today's workforce? That might be an easy question. If you guessed AI, you would be right. It tops the list, but it's not the only one employers are looking for in their employees current or new.

Joining me to talk about the most in-demand skills is Marni Baker Stein, chief Content officer for Coursera, one of the largest online learning platforms with more than 168 million users. Marni, really good to see you again.

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

So great to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And welcome to the podcast.

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Now, every year, Coursera puts out its job skills report, which is really an analysis of what you're hearing from some of your partners--businesses, government, higher ed--on what the in-demand skills are. What is the value of making that list and prioritizing the workforce skills?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

The value of it is it is a dynamic record in a moment in human history where skills are changing so rapidly. If we think about the technology adoption curve over time, so the time to reach a hundred million global users; electricity took 70 years and all the skills around electricity; mobile took 16 years. The World Wide Web took seven years; ChatGPT took two months, and it's having a cascading effect across all sectors, all job roles, all skills across disciplines.

And so having this dynamic record and making it available for leaders, government leaders, business leaders, as well as learners themselves to understand what's going on across the globe in terms of the skills employers are looking for, the skills learners are demanding, and the kind of skills and competencies that humans everywhere are finding it really, really important to develop.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you're able to really look at this in almost a real time. You'd said it that ChatGPT AI took a couple of months to really take hold, and now all employers are using it in some way, shape, or form.

And we'll get to the ethics part of it a little bit later in that conversation. But have you ever seen anything like this before? You're getting real-time data from people saying, "This is what we need." Have you ever seen anything so prevalent?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

No. I think that around 2019 cloud became a very, very prevalent skill that we're seeing across tech data and businesses being very critical. But GenAI is unique in that it is impacting the way we work, the way we think, the way we create across sectors from tech and data engineering and software development and finance to health and teaching and the way learners and students study.

So it is really broad ranging and that makes it incredibly unique in terms of what we're seeing in the skills space. We've seen over the last quarter, seven users a minute enrolling in AI content from across learner profiles and across the globe. That's up from three learners a minute in 2023.

And of course prior to 2023, nobody was even thinking about generative AI. So it's a phenomenon. It's really impacting, not only how we provide value at Coursera, but how employers are thinking about the needs of their learners and how universities are thinking about the needs of their students worldwide.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So if I'm a job seeker, what do I need to know about GenAI? How would you describe the skills that you need to learn to be able to compete in this workforce today?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

It's interesting because as a job seeker or somebody in a job or in a career or profession wanting to build that career and improve their competitive profile, obviously we've seen a major shift with GenAI and the types of skills that they really do need to be developing.

There are general GenAI skills, so certainly understanding what it is, how it works, the different tool sets that are out there is really critical. But also then how do I apply these skills in my job tasks as an accountant or in my job tasks as a UX designer or my job tasks as a teacher or a professor.

So really not only understanding what GenAI is, but also then, "Well, how can I use it in my daily work to, not only make myself more productive and leave more time for creativity, but really explore new ways of doing the work that are pretty exciting?"

So I think the message for people in a job is, yeah, learn about GenAI, but really learn about GenAI in ways that help you do your job more effectively. That's what we're trying to work on at Coursera, is we're working with learners from across sectors to integrate these skills into their everyday ways of doing and being.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And the businesses, I kind of mentioned it, they are all kind of jumping onboard, and so they're finding different ways to use it, as you said, across different industries. So it's not one size fits all. So if you're an accountant, you might do something a little bit differently than somebody in manufacturing or healthcare, but it still has that basic GenAI underneath it.

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

Yeah. And those tools are developing so rapidly. So when you're just getting to learn about what GenAI is, like what we're seeing on Coursera, is learners really just trying to get that awareness through courses like Google AI Essentials or Introduction to GenAI for Software Development or Introduction to Microsoft Copilot, sort of these really high-level explorations of tools so that you can get a sort of awareness about what AI even is and what we're even talking about.

But then we're seeing learners as they're getting through those tools moving into these application courses, tool sets that really help learners with things like data analysis or UX design or leadership.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Data ethics skills are also high in demand. So this is managing and analyzing customer data. What is it that maybe is the most in-demand course for that? What are people learning? Where can they learn it?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

We're seeing a broad range of data ethics programs spring up, of course, around this because obviously this has just opened up completely new sets of opportunities and concerns around how data is managed.

And we have really great courses coming out of our university partners from Duke, from Vanderbilt that are helping people really dive into what the ethics of this new era we're living in is and figure out how to grapple with those in the work that they're doing.

And I think beyond that, also, a whole range of courses that are supporting what you might call the soft skills or that human skills that will help us all get through this sort of transition we're making into this new area that are really concerned about the underlying critical thinking change management capabilities we need to have as we are applying these tools in our workplaces.

So those are courses on sort of critical thinking and planning and flexibility and interpersonal skills as we rethink teams around these capabilities, self-leadership, as well as sort of just digital skills to understand how to fit these digital tools into your everyday workflows.

So we're seeing not just an explosion of GenAI courses, but as you say, data ethics courses, a whole wide range of ethics courses, as well as these sort of soft skills to help us in a time of really pretty radical change that help us with critical thinking, that help us with self-awareness, and that help us with resilience.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So rapid deployment of GenAI puts a lot of tools in a lot of people's hands, and I see that there was a stat, I think, was in your report, 75% increase in cybersecurity attacks last year and fall of last year.

So that risk management idea, that's a skill that people need, is like how do you deal with this on that level? It's one thing on the ethics level, but this might be in a really practical way.

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

Yeah. And I think that's the case. So if you think about cybersecurity, cybersecurity skills are still in our highest demand skills. And as you say, the need for managing cyber risk at the level of a local school or local government to the level of a massive global corporation, it's just getting to be a greater and greater need globally, for better or for worse. That's the world we live in.

So we are seeing a lot of demand for skills in that risk management, cybersecurity management area as well. And those skills, those capabilities, those roles, those job tests are also being impacted by new AI capabilities and tool sets.

And so the intersection here between some of our top skill discipline industry areas that we serve and AI is very real. They're evolving together, and that's very exciting for a company like Coursera who has to keep up with that content.

But it's also a great challenge for both employers and employees who are trying to keep up with the times and make sure that they're competitive and they're doing their job and running their businesses best they can.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you mentioned some businesses, and it's also small businesses as well. So if somebody owns a corner bodega in New York or a small car wash in Tulsa, they have a computer system generally probably for ordering products online; many other reasons. I often talk about how cybersecurity... people with those cybersecurity skills can get a job helping small businesses as well.

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

Oh, yeah. If you think about the threat posed by cybersecurity, it isn't of course a major threat for large organizations, large corporations, but it can be a devastating existential threat to small companies, to small city governments, to schools. You hear a lot about schools being victims of cyber attacks. And so no matter the size of your business...

And let's face it, most businesses are small and medium-sized businesses. Most individuals in the world work for small and medium-sized businesses, and it's just as important, if not more important for those businesses to be ready for this new reality that we're living in and the skill sets that will support them to thrive, whether it's risk management or whether it's the productivity gains they can get as small businesses that come with some of the new AI-powered operating capabilities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You touched on it a little bit earlier about the durable skills or soft skills. There's a kind of back and forth on which language to use on that durable or soft. One of them is critical thinking. Employers want that critical thinking. And then another is that ability to work with a team and another is to communicate clearly.

And again, a stat I read in the report is: 71% of Gen Z workers say they find it difficult to speak up and contribute to a meeting. So is that something you feel that you can teach someone in a course?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

I'm a great believer in online learning, and I think that it is possible to create digital learning experiences that allow people to, not only learn about these soft skills or these human skills or these enduring skills, whatever we're calling them today, not only learn about them and hear about them and experience lectures or read about them, but also to put those skills into practice.

And what we're super excited about in terms of AI, in terms of our learning experience, of course, we're offering courses in AI, we're also deeply integrating AI into our pedagogy. And AI is really interesting for teaching soft skills because it allows for personalized, contextualized conversation with an AI agent.

I know that might sound a little nerdy or scary, but it's really powerful, if you think about it for practice, that you could actually get in a roleplay scenario where you can practice making a point or presenting an executive summary or having a difficult conversation or having a sensitive conversation.

So I think the power of AI is also really impacting digital and online learning itself in terms of what we can teach and how well we can really encourage mastery of skills that would've been very difficult for us to do even last year.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A lot of times AI is only as good as the information that you get it from. How do you do something like that where you're trying to teach someone how to speak well or to answer questions clearly? How does AI work in that?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

What's really interesting about it for Coursera is that when we're building these bounded dialogue based activities into our courses, they are bound into the instruction and the context of that course from Michigan or from that faculty member or from that collection of courses from Duke.

So when our university partners or industry partners are building these activities into their courses, there is an integrity in that activity that really comes from the instructional environment that they have authored, and it comes from their expertise.

So that's what I love about our opportunity at Coursera now is to... it's really take that incredible trusted set of experts that we have globally who represent all of these major universities and all of these major industries and massive employers, taking that instruction, that learning, those programs that they've already created and are creating, and then using that to anchor these learning experiences which are really, truly interactive and impactful for learners.

And we do see across our hundreds of millions of learners that they respond very well to being able to interact deeply with learning. That's what engages them, that's what keeps them going. And we're just at the beginning of what we can do on this firm.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you've mentioned some of your partners and we've talked about the skills. So now if I'm out there thinking, "This makes sense to me. I need to learn this. I need to learn all of this," what do I do? How do I connect to these kind of courses?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

I think it's really helpful if you're interested in AI or cybersecurity or data science or cloud or whatever you're interested in... Because we offer a really broad range of courses and skills on Coursera, and there are many other platforms out there as well. I think it's really helpful to build backwards from what you're trying to achieve, to think about what your goal is.

Are you trying to get a new job? Are you trying to master a particular skill? Do you just want to learn about something and then consider how much time you want to dedicate? Do you just want to dabble, just have a few minutes a week? Do you have a few months? Do you want to take a deeper dive?

And once you understand what that commitment is, I think if you come to a platform like Coursera, we just have a lot of options for you, whether it is a short course or course, or like many learners, whether it is something like a certificate that not only do you learn about a particular skill, develop a level of mastery, but you have that achievement or that verified certificate at the end that you can use almost as a currency when you're working with employers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Marni, you've spent 25 plus years looking at courses and helping produce, not just courses, but online and hybrid education programs. So tell me a little bit about your background. What got you into this?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

I have always worked in education, and what got me interested in digital and online education was when I was at the University of California, Santa Barbara and I got my first look at a website. It was the first mosaic think it was. And I thought, "Wow, what is that?"

And we had the opportunity to, very early days, back in the '90s, put courses online on websites. I remember associate them with the new Amazon bookstore. That was a long time ago. But I remember thinking, "This is going to change everything," because now people at the time all over the state of California wouldn't necessarily have access to these skills in this instruction now do at a fraction of the cost.

And that's just sort of guided my career. So I went to Penn. I started the first online programs at the University of Pennsylvania. Then our team migrated north to Columbia, where we did a lot of really cool online, hybrid programs for professional master's programs. And I worked on digital infrastructure work out at the University of Texas, and I ended up as provost at Western Governors University before I came to Coursera.

So I've followed that mission to figuring out how we can really have an impact on the lives of people everywhere as they're trying to keep up with a lifelong learning environment that's really challenging.

And so Coursera was a natural step for me, and it's been just an honor to be working as chief content officer, not only at Coursera, but during this moment when content has literally exploded because of GenAI.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you have any secrets that we need to know? What is the next skill am I going to need to be successful?

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

There is no doubt about it that if you don't already have AI skills, GenAI, and GenAI skills, that you absolutely need to develop them, and you absolutely need to develop them very specifically for the job that you're in and the job tasks that you're doing.

In The Future of Jobs Report 2025, WEF report, they found that 50% of employers plan to reorient their entire businesses in response to AI. 85% of those employers say they plan to upskill their workforce in response to these skills gaps.

A large number of those employers are saying that they prefer job applicants that have verified AI skills, and many of them are... what I was reading recently, are also just deploying signing bonuses for people who have these AI skills that are very specific to their job roles and their professions.

So without a doubt, these are the skills you need to go get them, be ahead of the curve, because it will pay off and it will continue to pay off as we see this whole new world we're living continue to evolve.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Marni, thank you for taking the time to talk to me today. It's good to see you.

Marni Baker Stein, Coursera chief content officer:

Good to see you too. Thanks so much.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Marni Baker Stein, chief Content officer for Coursera. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.