

Foundations of the Future Skills Framework

FSI FOUNDATIONAL PAPER

A life-centred perspective on six development fields, 24 Future Skills and 96 subskills

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Foreword

Methodological context: This publication is a conceptual synthesis of existing frameworks, research findings and future scenarios. It is neither a representative empirical study nor a psychometrically validated diagnostic instrument.

This paper grew out of a simple yet uncomfortable observation: we live in a period of profound technological, economic and social change. Yet many discussions about being prepared for the future still focus almost exclusively on work, employability and careers.

At the same time, many people face other, more fundamental questions. These are questions we repeatedly encounter both in professional settings and in personal conversations:

- How secure are work and income in a world where requirements are constantly changing?
- How can I keep pace with these developments without feeling permanently overwhelmed?
- What can I give my children when circumstances change faster than education systems can respond?
- And, amid all this uncertainty, how can we lead a life that does more than simply function - one that also feels coherent and satisfying?

Living under the conditions we are likely to face resembles a voyage on the open sea more than a journey towards a fixed destination. The sea on which we travel is rarely calm. Currents, changing weather and sudden shifts of direction are normal. The wind represents external developments we cannot control. The boat is our own life, with its history, relationships, strengths and limits. And the sails are the abilities through which we learn to use these dynamics rather than merely being exposed to them.

In this sense, being prepared for the future does not mean calming the sea or knowing the perfect course. It emerges when people retain a sense of direction, regularly review their course and consciously make small adjustments - especially when the weather changes.

This paper therefore understands Future Skills primarily as life skills rather than labour-market qualifications: abilities that help people consciously lead, develop and shape their lives under changing conditions, both professionally and personally. Its central proposition is that, in a world of growing uncertainty, the decisive capability is not planning but the capacity to learn, shape circumstances and adapt.

What people regret at the end of life

The work of Bronnie Ware, who spent many years accompanying people in the final phase of life, offers a particularly powerful way into this perspective. Recurring patterns emerge from her conversations with people who were dying. At the end of life, they rarely regretted insufficient achievement, too little success or inadequate material security. Instead, they repeatedly raised similar issues.

Many said they wished they had had the courage to live their own lives rather than fulfil other people's expectations. They regretted working too much and neglecting family, friendships and health. They wished they had expressed their feelings more often, shown appreciation and resolved conflicts. They mourned friendships that had been lost because they had not been nurtured during busy lives. Finally, many said they wished they had allowed themselves to be happier rather than being guided by routines, fears or external standards.

These statements are not moral appeals. Nor are they instructions for living a 'correct' life. They do, however, make one thing very clear: in the end, what matters is not what can be optimised but what can be consciously shaped - relationships, health, meaningful activity, purpose and lived joy.

Why Future Skills - and why think about them differently?

The term Future Skills is generally used in relation to the labour market. It describes the abilities people need to remain employable. This perspective matters, but it is too narrow. This paper asks a broader question: what abilities do people need to lead satisfying lives as a whole under changing conditions?

Work is an important part of life, but it is not the measure of life. Health, relationships, self-regulation, the capacity to learn and a sense of meaning determine whether people remain capable, satisfied and able to act over the long term. For this reason, the Institute has developed its own framework, of which the Future Skills list is only one component. The first step is to provide orientation: which abilities might be relevant at all in an uncertain future, both at work and in personal life?

The second step makes these abilities tangible: what exactly do they mean, in which life situations do they make a difference, and how can different levels of development be understood? Finally, attention turns forwards: how can personal development be shaped over time without overload or rigid plans, but with a conscious direction? The three parts follow precisely this progression: from orientation, through understanding, to shaping one's life.

A realistic view of development

Developing abilities is not a short-term undertaking. It is slow, often unremarkable and rarely linear. People begin from very different starting points, both in terms of their existing skills and levels of development and in terms of what they experience as meaningful, desirable or fulfilling.

Many abilities we develop throughout our lives do not emerge through planning or a systematic process. They are by-products of our contexts: work environments, experiences at school or university, family influences, involvement in a sports club or disruptions to our life stories. People who had to take responsibility early often develop resilience. Those who grew up in supportive relationships are more likely to strengthen social skills. Other abilities may remain untouched for a long time, not because of a lack of potential but because of a lack of opportunity.

This paper does not assume that every ability described is equally relevant to every person, or relevant at the same time. It invites conscious selection rather than an attempt to develop everything. In this sense, being prepared for the future does not mean being as complete as possible. It means being coherent: aligned with one's circumstances, priorities and possibilities.

One question therefore lies at the centre: how can I increase the likelihood that, over time, I consciously develop a few abilities that matter to me, so that I remain self-effective, satisfied and able to act in the future, professionally and personally?

This reflects a thought often attributed, in paraphrase, to Bill Gates: most people overestimate what they can achieve in one year and underestimate what is possible in ten. This perspective particularly informs the seven-step method for continuous development, with the app intended to provide everyday support.

Orientation: which abilities matter?

Anyone setting out on a journey first needs orientation. This is not a completed plan but a rough map: what is out there? Which abilities might matter in an uncertain future, and which assumptions about being prepared for the future may be too narrow?

The question of which abilities are relevant to a good life today and over the coming decades cannot be answered by a single discipline. It follows neither a linear competency logic nor one unified theoretical approach. Orientation emerges when different perspectives are deliberately brought together.

The Future Skills framework developed by Future Skills Institut is based on precisely this integration. It connects labour-market, psychological, social and practical perspectives on life, starting from the present in 2026 and looking openly towards the coming years and decades. Each perspective illuminates a different aspect of what people need to remain able to act, able to learn and internally coherent under changed conditions.

The following four chapters each perform a distinct function. Only when considered together do they create the orientation framework from which the Future Skills list is derived.

Existing Future Skills frameworks: what is already well described

Established Future Skills frameworks from research, business and education provide the starting point. They offer an empirically grounded overview of what organisations, labour markets and experts currently consider relevant. Their strength lies in systematically distilling requirements arising from technological change, globalisation and new forms of work.

At the same time, these frameworks reveal their focus: work, employability and the economic value of abilities. This paper therefore treats them not as a final answer but as a necessary foundation for further thinking.

Happiness and life satisfaction research: what sustains a good life

The second perspective deliberately looks beyond work. Research on happiness and life satisfaction asks about the conditions for a life that remains healthy, meaningful and coherent over the long term, rather than about labour-market requirements. Its findings have been remarkably stable over decades and sometimes sit uneasily alongside familiar narratives of performance and success.

This research provides an important corrective. It shows that abilities such as building relationships, self-regulation and meaning orientation are not 'soft' extras but central conditions for long-term agency and adaptability. For the framework, these insights mark a clear shift in reference point: from employability alone to life skills.

Future scenarios for Europe: the conditions in which abilities must work

The third perspective looks ahead. Scenarios concerning AI, automation, geopolitical shifts in power and economic development in Europe show that many previously implicit assumptions - stable working lives, increasing prosperity or reliable social protection systems, for example - can no longer be taken for granted.

In this paper, these scenarios serve as robustness checks, not forecasts. They ask which abilities people need to remain able to act under very different future conditions, some of them highly challenging. Abilities that work only in optimistic scenarios are insufficient for a framework.

Additional perspectives on development potential: how abilities emerge

A fourth component consists of additional work in developmental, motivational and organisational psychology, including learning capacity, character strengths and development potential. Books such as Adam Grant's Hidden Potential focus less on which abilities matter than on how people develop them, including outside formal education and under adverse conditions.

This perspective is essential if the framework is to be understood as a framework for development rather than a static list of competencies, with continuous learning functioning as a kind of meta-skill. Future Skills are understood here as capable of being shaped, practised and developed in context, rather than fixed traits or new normative demands.

The framework emerges from the intersection of these four perspectives. It identifies abilities that:

- repeatedly appear as relevant in existing frameworks;
- are empirically associated with life satisfaction, health and meaning;
- remain useful across very different future scenarios;
- and can be developed throughout life.

The framework deliberately does not pursue maximum comprehensiveness. Its aim is not to represent every conceivable competency but to distil central development fields that understand work as an important, yet not exclusive, part of life.

1. Existing Future Skills frameworks

WHAT IS ALREADY WELL DESCRIBED

Numerous models and lists have emerged in recent years describing which abilities people will need in the future. This paper draws particularly on the Stifterverband Future Skills framework updated in December 2025, the World Economic Forum's skills forecasts and other approaches from research and practice. These include the OECD, the Fraunhofer Institute for Industrial Engineering IAO's Future Skills Radar, and individual authors working in labour-market research, organisational development and the economics of education. Stifterverband is a network of 3,500 businesses, foundations, research organisations and individuals that systematically contributes to shaping education and research.

These frameworks differ in structure, terminology and level of detail. Some are more education-oriented; others are clearly driven by labour-market concerns. Nevertheless, they share a common core and a common origin.

Almost all these models are based on:

- surveys of employees;
- assessments by managers, senior staff and human resources professionals;
- expert judgements from business and academia;
- and meta-analyses of work based on the first three sources.

Understandably, the focus is therefore primarily on the question: which abilities do people need to remain employable, capable and adaptable in a changing world of work? This perspective is important and valuable. It explains why learning capacity, problem-solving, collaboration and teamwork, digital and technological skills, and innovation and transformation skills play a central role in almost every framework.

Looking across existing frameworks first reveals very different levels of granularity. With its Future Skills Radar, the Fraunhofer Institute for Industrial Engineering IAO has presented a particularly comprehensive model: it identifies 1,016 individual skills, grouped into 53 Future Skills clusters, which are in turn assigned to four overarching skill classes. The radar offers an impressive map of future competency requirements, particularly for businesses, educational institutions and training providers seeking highly specific planning and differentiation.

By contrast, Stifterverband's Future Skills framework takes a much more condensed approach. It identifies 30 central Future Skills, structured into five skill classes, primarily aiming to provide strategic orientation and accessibility for a broad audience.

Both approaches have merit. Yet they also reveal a central tension: the more differentiated and comprehensive a competency model becomes, the harder it is to focus on what matters most, particularly from the perspective of leading an individual life and overall life satisfaction. One essential difference between existing frameworks and the list developed here lies in the deliberate selection of what is not included. Both Fraunhofer IAO's Future Skills Radar and Stifterverband's framework contain numerous clearly specialist, sometimes highly specialised skills. Examples include working with quantum computing, developing intelligent and autonomous systems, and creating complex robotics solutions.

These abilities are undoubtedly relevant to the future, but primarily for clearly defined occupational groups and fields of activity. The overview developed here deliberately excludes purely specialist skills where their principal use is confined to particular occupations or sectors. This is not because they are unimportant but because they serve another purpose: they can be taught, certified and, when necessary, replaced in a targeted way. The guiding idea is therefore: jobs change; underlying abilities endure.

Whereas specialist skills often have a limited shelf life, cross-cutting abilities are considerably more stable and frequently valuable beyond work. They enable people to acquire, assess and meaningfully apply new specialist competencies in the first place. The framework therefore concentrates on abilities that outlast occupational change and also matter in personal life beyond the workplace.

A similar principle of judgement applies to normative or sociopolitical competency labels. Stifterverband, for example, explicitly includes democratic competence: the ability to act in support of democratic principles and fundamental rights and against disinformation. It also includes diversity competence: the ability to value diversity, create inclusive and diversity-sensitive relationships, and use differences productively in collaboration.

These objectives are highly relevant to society. Nevertheless, this overview does not include them as separate competency dimensions. This is not because democratic action or diversity is unimportant, but because the underlying abilities - perspective-taking, dialogue, valuing diversity, a sense of responsibility and critical thinking, for example - are already integrated into its social and relationship skills category.

Nor does this paper seek to establish every socially desirable attitude as a normative requirement. Not everyone must or wants to participate actively in politics. What matters is that people have the abilities to treat others respectfully, evaluate information reflectively and make responsible decisions within their own sphere of influence.

Selection criteria for this Future Skills overview

The selection of Future Skills presented in the following chapters therefore follows clear criteria:

- The abilities work across occupations and are not tied to individual tasks.
- They contribute to quality of life in personal contexts as well as at work.
- They provide a foundation on which specialist skills can be built, renewed or replaced.

In the established approaches discussed above, work remains central. Other areas of life - relationships, health, meaning, self-fulfilment or long-term life satisfaction, for example - are usually considered only indirectly or at the margins. Life without work, whether voluntary or involuntary, can and must also be shaped. The chapter on future scenarios shows that, in future, we may possess many professional skills and still be unable to find work. The next step therefore broadens the perspective by asking a question given insufficient attention in the models discussed:

Which abilities help people not only obtain and retain a job, but also lead a balanced, meaningful and healthy life over many years?

The framework developed here is therefore not intended to compete with existing models. It is a deliberate reduction, supplemented by skills drawn from other contexts of life.

2. Happiness research

WHAT SUSTAINS A GOOD LIFE

As described above, Future Skills are commonly considered from a labour-market perspective. Less often do we ask which abilities help people lead a life that remains satisfying, healthy and meaningful over the long term. This is precisely where happiness and life satisfaction research begins.

For several decades, psychologists, sociologists and economists have systematically studied the factors that shape human well-being and the assumptions that empirical data reveal to be misleading. Their findings provide important additions to conventional Future Skills frameworks and help broaden their focus.

What we know about a good life

One of the best-known longitudinal studies is the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has followed the lives of several generations for more than 80 years. Led at the time of writing by Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, its findings have been made accessible to a wider audience in *The Good Life*.

One of its central insights can be expressed with surprising clarity: the strongest predictors of life satisfaction and health are not wealth, status or career success, but the quality of social relationships.

People with stable, trusting and supportive relationships, whether with partners, family or friends, are not only more satisfied but also healthier physically and psychologically. Loneliness, by contrast, is demonstrably burdensome and increases the risk of numerous illnesses. Many other studies support these findings. Large surveys such as the World Happiness Report also repeatedly show that social connection, trust and perceived support have a stronger influence on life satisfaction than many objective or externally visible conditions, such as a job title, a car, a house or a holiday.

Arianna Huffington's experiences among highly successful and wealthy people offer interesting observations in this context. They illustrate how insufficient self-regulation or the loss of sustaining relationships can lead to exhaustion and crises of meaning even under exceptionally favourable material conditions:

- **Estrangement in relationships.** According to Huffington, highly successful people frequently report estranged partnerships, fragile family relationships and instrumental friendships. Success becomes destructive to relationships when time, attention and emotional presence are continually sacrificed. A particular problem is that social deficits are often noticed only late, for example during a crisis or in retirement.
- **Loss of internal standards.** Huffington suggests that, over their careers, many very wealthy people lose a clear sense of when enough is enough. Success becomes a self-reinforcing spiral: more responsibility leads to more pressure, more work and still more responsibility. Happiness is postponed until 'after the next exit' or 'after the next deal', a point that rarely arrives.
- **Crises of meaning despite external freedom.** Paradoxically, crises of meaning often appear precisely when financial constraints fall away. Without external necessities, it becomes clear that

identity was closely tied to achievement, self-worth depended on productivity and internal direction was missing.

These observations echo central findings in life satisfaction research and underline the importance of personal, relationship and health-related abilities as core components of a life prepared for the future. They vividly illustrate what happens when abilities such as self-regulation, social and relationship skills, setting boundaries, clarifying values and finding meaning are not developed, even under ideal material conditions. These personal skills are a prerequisite for healthy living at every level of prosperity.

Harvard professor Arthur C. Brooks offers an important shift in perspective. In his work, including *Build the Life You Want* and *The Happiness Files*, he argues that happiness is less a permanently attainable state than the result of particular abilities and habits. Brooks distinguishes short-term well-being from long-term life satisfaction. Whereas the former is strongly influenced by external circumstances, the latter can be shaped through conscious decisions and competencies. He describes 'building blocks' of a good life: meaning, relationships, work, faith or inner convictions, and personal development.

What matters is not perfect development in each of these areas but the ability to rebalance them repeatedly. Happiness thus becomes a dynamic process: satisfaction emerges through progress towards personal goals that are individually meaningful, changing and balanced.

Central insights and their implications for Future Skills

Looking across happiness and life satisfaction research reveals several recurring patterns that are particularly relevant to the Future Skills list developed here.

First, the ability to build and maintain relationships is a key competency. Establishing and sustaining stable social relationships requires abilities that go far beyond communication alone. They include emotional openness, reliability, handling conflict, empathy and a willingness to invest time and attention. Relationships do not happen as a side effect; they result from continuous care.

Second, health is not a by-product but something actively shaped. Physical and psychological health are closely connected to self-regulation: recognising limits, managing stress, establishing routines and responding to warning signals from one's own body. Research clearly shows that people who consistently organise their lives beyond their capacity lose satisfaction over time, even when they are professionally successful.

Third, meaning arises through coherence rather than permanent self-optimisation. Meaning is often associated with grand life goals or extraordinary achievements. Research, however, suggests that meaning primarily emerges when people experience their actions as coherent: when values, decisions and everyday life fit together in an understandable way. Creating this coherence and regularly reviewing it is an ability, not something that can be taken for granted.

Fourth, satisfaction requires the capacity to deal with ambivalence. A fulfilling life is not free of problems, conflict or loss. What matters is the ability to live with contradictions, accept imperfection and endure periods of uncertainty. Resilience, tolerance of ambiguity and emotional regulation prove to be central resources.

These abilities are neither purely personal nor exclusively professional. They operate in both areas at once and exemplify this paper's approach of understanding work within the larger context of life. Being prepared for the future without life satisfaction is not sustainable.

3. Future scenarios for Europe

WHAT COULD HAPPEN

Future Skills cannot be considered separately from the world in which people will live and work. Abilities always operate under specific economic, technological and social conditions. Any discussion of being prepared for the future must therefore also consider those conditions.

Projections for Europe's development depict growing uncertainty. They differ in detail but share one central point: the coming decades will be shaped less by stable expectations than by profound, overlapping disruptions. Technological progress, geopolitical shifts in power, demographic change and economic tensions do not operate in isolation; they reinforce one another.

This is particularly visible in the interaction between artificial intelligence, automation and robotics. AI systems change not only individual tasks but entire occupational profiles, in knowledge-intensive as well as operational fields. Leading voices from research and business suggest that these developments are moving faster and affecting more areas than earlier technological upheavals. Not every assessment will prove correct in the form stated. What matters, however, is less the precise forecast than the direction: work will change fundamentally in its content, structure and availability.

These technological dynamics meet Europe during a period of structural weakness. Declining competitiveness, stagnating prosperity and increasing geopolitical tensions are changing the conditions under which life plans have previously worked. International institutions describe this as a 'polycrisis': a situation in which ecological, technological, geopolitical and social challenges reinforce one another.

The implication of these diagnoses is not resignation but a shift of attention. The decisive question is less what exactly will happen than how people can respond to what comes. Being prepared for the future then arises not from adapting to a clearly defined end state but from abilities that support orientation, learning and inner stability under unclear and contradictory conditions.

Against this background, the following pages outline three simplified future scenarios. They are not predictions but ranges of possible development, intended to help clarify the conditions in which abilities may need to work in the coming years. Work is an important aspect, but not the only one. The overall perspective remains a good life under changed circumstances.

Scenario 1 (optimistic): a fragile balance

In this scenario, politics, business and society manage to harness some of the productivity gains from technology and stabilise social protection systems at least in part. Artificial intelligence and automation replace many activities but also create new roles, particularly in the oversight, integration, maintenance and responsible use of digital systems.

For many people, work remains a central source of income and identity, although under significantly changed conditions. Working lives become more fragmented and career transitions more frequent. Unemployment rates in this scenario range from approximately 7 to 12 per cent. Losses of prosperity are noticeable but remain limited. Public systems come under pressure but continue to function.

Key challenges for individuals are:

- frequent career reorientation;

- growing demands on adaptability and learning;
- increasing uncertainty in life planning and retirement provision.

Key abilities that remain particularly relevant or become more important in this scenario are:

- learning and adaptability;
- self-regulation and personal direction;
- basic digital skills and understanding AI;
- social stability through sustaining relationships.

In this scenario, what matters is less the occupation initially learned than the ability to develop over time without sacrificing health and balance in life.

Scenario 2 (between optimistic and pessimistic): accelerated structural disruption and a fragmented society

In this scenario, technological development accelerates so strongly that AI systems and automation replace a substantial proportion of today's jobs. New activities emerge, but in considerably smaller numbers and often only for a limited section of the population. Demand falls particularly for knowledge-intensive entry-level and routine tasks, and for large parts of logistics and production work.

Europe comes under increasing competitive pressure. Declining industrial value creation, falling order volumes and structural disadvantages as a business location amplify technological substitution. Unemployment rates rise above 15 per cent in this scenario. Real losses of prosperity accumulate over several years.

Public financing systems come under severe pressure. Pension and health systems are cut back, and social inequality increases visibly. Trust in institutions declines further, while social polarisation and disinformation increase.

Key challenges for individuals are:

- long-term unemployment or precarious employment;
- the loss of conventional sources of status, role and meaning;
- intensified social comparison and growing uncertainty.

Key abilities that become more important here are:

- finding meaning and direction;
- psychological stability and self-regulation;
- building relationships and participating in communities;
- innovation and the capacity to shape life beyond conventional paid work.

In this scenario, professional adaptability alone is no longer sufficient. What matters is how people sustain meaning, belonging and self-efficacy outside stable employment.

Scenario 3 (pessimistic): systemic disruption and work as the exception

In the extreme scenario, technological development accelerates so strongly that human labour is no longer required for many activities. Artificial intelligence, humanoid robots and autonomous systems take over a large share of economic value creation. Work no longer arises for reasons of efficiency, but at most where human interaction is deliberately desired. Unemployment rates in this scenario could temporarily rise well above 30 per cent.

Europe loses further economic and technological sovereignty. Public financing models largely collapse and social protection systems fragment. A small, highly qualified elite controls technological value creation, while large sections of the population depend on transfers, informal activities or local community structures.

Social inequality takes extreme forms. Conventional life models lose their ability to provide direction. Questions of meaning and identity become central to many people's everyday lives.

Key challenges for individuals are:

- existential insecurity;
- the loss of familiar models of life and work;
- deep crises of meaning and identity;
- increasing social fragmentation.

Key abilities that become essential to survival in this scenario are:

- strong personal skills and the capacity to find direction;
- building relationships and participating in communities;
- psychological resilience and actively constructing meaning;
- shaping possibilities and innovating outside conventional employment structures.

In this scenario, being prepared for the future changes fundamentally: away from employability and towards the ability to lead a meaningful life, connected to others, under radically changed conditions.

Implications for the Future Skills framework

These three scenarios differ in intensity, not in direction. None is a prediction. Instead, they indicate ranges of possible development. In deriving Future Skills, the decisive issue is less which scenario occurs than which abilities help people remain able to act, able to learn and internally stable across all three.

The future creates new demands not only for work but for the conduct of life as a whole. Conventional specialist skills become less stable, while cross-cutting life skills gain importance. The scenarios outlined here therefore reinforce and sharpen individual categories within the Future Skills overview:

- Personal skills and the ability to find direction become important factors in uncertain life circumstances.
- Social and relationship skills become more important as work occupies a smaller share of life. Satisfaction might increasingly arise from good time spent in groups or communities.

- Learning, adaptability, innovation and change-related abilities determine whether people recognise and use opportunities to shape their circumstances. In the spirit of adaptation commonly associated with Darwin: a satisfying life may depend less on being the strongest or the most intelligent than on being able to change.
- Basic digital and technological skills become a prerequisite for participation in society.

Future Skills are therefore less than ever simply labour-market abilities. They are abilities for leading a liveable, meaningful and socially connected life in an uncertain, technology-shaped and potentially less prosperous world.

4. Perspectives on development

HOW ABILITIES EMERGE

A fourth element in deriving Future Skills comes from additional work in developmental, motivational and behavioural psychology. These approaches shift attention from which abilities are theoretically relevant to how abilities actually emerge in everyday life, become established and remain effective over longer periods.

Books such as Adam Grant's *Hidden Potential* and James Clear's *Atomic Habits*, known in German as *Die 1% Methode*, share a fundamental assumption: being prepared for the future does not arise from isolated learning efforts or grand transformations but from continuous, often unremarkable development.

This perspective is essential if the Future Skills list is to be understood not as an ambitious but impractical competency architecture, but as a realistic development framework rooted in people's actual lives.

Learning capacity is central to this perspective. As already discussed, the framework treats it as a meta-skill: an ability that connects and enables all other competency categories.

James Clear's work adds an important operational dimension. Learning capacity appears primarily not in major decisions to learn, but in small, repeated behaviours that make a difference over time. The so-called '1 per cent method' describes precisely this effect: tiny, consistent improvements lead to substantial development over the long term, whereas large but one-off efforts often dissipate.

For the framework, this means that learning capacity is not just a cognitive competency but an ability close to behaviour that is expressed in everyday life: regularly reflecting, adjusting small routines or systematically using feedback, for example.

A central element shared by development research and habit research is the emphasis on time. Many abilities described in the framework - self-regulation, relationship skills, tolerance of ambiguity and meaning orientation - cannot be accelerated without losing depth. James Clear states this explicitly: people often overestimate what they can change in the short term and underestimate what is possible through long-term, consistent habits. This logic contradicts the widespread expectation of rapid competency gains through training, programmes or certificates. For the Future Skills framework, slowness is not a deficit but a mark of quality. Future-ready skills are not tools but stable internal structures that emerge through repetition, experience and deliberate practice over time.

Another relevant contribution from *Atomic Habits* concerns the relationship between motivation and behaviour. Whereas conventional development models often assume that motivation is the starting point for change, habit research offers a more nuanced picture: motivation often arises through action rather than preceding it. This adds a pragmatic dimension to the frequently cited idea of 'find your why'. A clear why can stabilise development, but it is not always the starting point. Particularly under uncertainty, overload or anxiety about the future, it is often more realistic to begin with small, meaningful actions from which motivation and direction can subsequently emerge.

For the Future Skills overview, this means that self-regulation includes not only clarifying meaning but also organising development into small, manageable steps, even when larger goals remain unclear.

Another central idea in Atomic Habits is the connection between behaviour and identity. Clear argues that sustainable change emerges when new habits are experienced not as external demands but as expressions of 'who I want to be'. This matters for the framework. Future-ready skills make a difference not as an additional to-do list, but when they become part of a stable understanding of oneself: as someone who keeps learning, nurtures relationships or consciously manages personal limits, for example. In this way, the habit perspective connects with meaning and direction. Development is not merely functional; it also shapes identity.

Both Grant and Clear emphasise that development rarely takes place under ideal conditions. Lack of time, uncertainty, emotional strain and conflicting demands are normal, not exceptional. This is precisely why small, robust development mechanisms matter. Habits work even when motivation fluctuates, future possibilities are unclear or external stability is absent. For a Future Skills framework that explicitly takes pessimistic scenarios seriously, this is a central finding.

Integrating the habit perspective sharpens several fundamental assumptions of the framework:

- Learning capacity is a meta-skill expressed through small, consistent actions in everyday life.
- Skill development is slow, cumulative and closely connected to identity.
- Motivation is an outcome and amplifier of action, not necessarily a prerequisite.
- Being prepared for the future arises through robust development mechanisms rather than short-term intensity.

This makes the framework explicitly grounded in life. It describes not only which abilities people need, but also how they can develop and maintain them under realistic conditions.

Being prepared for the future is then demonstrated less through spectacular learning achievements than through the capacity to develop in small steps over many years, even when external conditions are unstable.

5. Future Skills overview

WHAT MATTERS

The preceding chapters brought together different perspectives on being prepared for the future. Existing Future Skills lists from business, education and research provided the starting point. They offer a broad empirical foundation and clarify which abilities are considered relevant in a changing world of work.

This labour-market perspective was deliberately broadened. Findings from happiness and life satisfaction research show that long-term satisfaction and agency depend not only on career success but substantially on factors such as self-regulation, relationships, meaning orientation and learning capacity. Being prepared for the future is therefore a matter not only of employability but of shaping one's life.

A third perspective considered plausible future scenarios for Europe. Technological disruption, particularly through AI, geopolitical shifts, economic uncertainty and social polarisation change the conditions under which people live, work and make decisions. These scenarios show that many coming challenges cannot be met through specialist knowledge alone; they require robust, cross-cutting abilities.

Finally, a developmental psychology perspective was added. Abilities do not emerge at isolated moments but over time. They can be practised, depend on context and are closely interwoven. Learning thus becomes the central enabling capability, understood not as formal continuing education but as a lifelong process of development.

The synthesis of these four perspectives - existing frameworks, happiness and life satisfaction research, future scenarios and the logic of development - yielded 24 Future Skills, grouped into six categories.

Figure 1. Future Skills overview

Development field	Future Skills
Learning and development skills	Learning awareness and self-reflection Learning motivation and curiosity Learning strategies and self-regulation Learning transfer and application
Personal skills	Self-awareness and emotional self-regulation Self-acceptance and inner stability Managing pressure and resilience Meaning and values orientation
Social and relationship skills	Relationship skills and building trust Empathy and perspective-taking Communication and dialogue Conflict competence and constructive management of tensions
Cognitive and problem-solving skills	Analytical thinking and problem recognition Systems thinking and handling complexity Critical thinking and judgement Creative problem-solving and shifting perspectives
Innovation and transformation skills	Openness to change and adaptability Future and possibility thinking Creativity and innovation Managing ambiguity and uncertainty
Digital and technological skills	Basic digital competence and confident use of technology Data and AI literacy (user-oriented) Understanding automation and processes Digital ethics and responsibility

The six Future Skills categories

The 24 skills are grouped into six categories. These are not isolated competency fields but different perspectives on how people can lead, develop and shape their lives under changing conditions.

Learning and development skills

This is the framework's meta-skill. Learning capacity is understood here as the ability to enable development throughout life: recognising development needs, connecting learning with meaning, trying new things through practical application, and sustaining effort over time through development discipline.

Personal skills

These form the inner foundation of being prepared for the future. Personal skills describe the ability to guide oneself internally, emotionally, motivationally and through self-regulation. They concern self-awareness and inner clarity, self-regulation and emotional regulation, meaning orientation, and resilience and self-acceptance.

Social and relationship skills

These determine the quality of relationships in families, friendships, work and society. They concern empathy, communication, relationships and cooperation, and constructive approaches to feedback, conflict and boundaries.

Cognitive and problem-solving skills

These enable people to understand complexity and remain able to act. They include analytical, critical, systemic and creative thinking, particularly when dealing with uncertainty, information overload and AI-supported decisions, as well as problem-solving abilities.

Innovation and transformation skills

These describe the capacity to contribute actively to shaping the future. They concern developing visions of the future, exploring new approaches, willingness to change oneself and translating change into impact.

Digital and technological skills

These enable confident, reflective use of technology. The focus is not on specialist technical skills but on basic digital autonomy and ethics, understanding data and AI, and using tools skilfully and meaningfully.

Limits and scope of this Future Skills overview

The Future Skills list developed here makes no claim to completeness or universal validity. It is a model for orientation, not a diagnostic instrument, a normative benchmark or a promise of a 'correct' life. This makes it particularly useful to state its limits and scope explicitly.

A frame of reference, not a catalogue

The framework is deliberately not an additive list of competencies. It does not follow the logic that more skills are always better. Instead, it distils central developmental abilities into six categories that have emerged as particularly useful in considering the future, life satisfaction and development.

Other models identify considerably more individual competencies, often several dozen. This diversity is understandable from a specialist perspective but frequently leads to overload or arbitrariness in practice. This approach therefore takes the opposite route: reduction in the service of orientation.

No separation of 'personal' and 'professional' life

Many Future Skills frameworks are primarily motivated by labour-market concerns. They ask which abilities people need to remain employable. This approach deliberately goes further. The competencies described here relate to life as a whole. They matter at work, but equally in families, friendships, health, social participation and personal development. The distinction between 'professional' and 'personal' competencies is deliberately avoided because it increasingly fails to reflect how people actually live.

Deliberately excluding purely specialist skills

This framework deliberately excludes occupation-specific or technology-specific expertise. Abilities such as installing heating systems, developing robotics, repairing bicycles or performing heart surgery are undoubtedly relevant, but not universal. The guiding assumption is that jobs change while underlying abilities endure. The framework therefore focuses on competencies that remain useful across occupations and phases of life.

Integrating central life concerns rather than separating them

Topics such as physical and mental health, financial security and social responsibility do not appear as separate categories. This is a deliberate decision, not an omission.

These aspects are integrated into:

- personal skills, such as resilience and managing one's life;
- social and relationship skills;
- and learning and development skills.

An additional category would have expanded the model without increasing its explanatory power.

Overlap reflects reality rather than error

The six categories are not sharply separable in a technical sense. Learning capacity influences self-regulation. Digital competence requires critical thinking. The ability to change depends on emotional regulation.

These overlaps are understood not as weaknesses but as reflections of real developmental processes. People develop abilities in interaction rather than isolation. The framework invites reflection on these connections rather than artificially separating them.

No normative instructions for living

This paper does not prescribe what a good life should look like. It defines neither models of success nor goals intended to apply to everyone. What people find meaningful, desirable or fulfilling is deeply individual. The framework therefore offers dimensions of development rather than goals. It supports people in finding their own answers rather than meeting someone else's standards.

Why six categories, rather than more or fewer?

The decision to use six categories results from deliberate judgement. Fewer categories would have obscured relevant perspectives. More would have replaced orientation with complexity.

Together, the six categories provide:

- an inner foundation through personal skills;

- a driver of development through learning and development skills;
- and four central fields for shaping life in a complex future.

From the chart to a closer look

This Future Skills list establishes the frame of reference. It describes which abilities are particularly useful under the conditions of an uncertain, technology-shaped future, and why. A further part of Future Skills Institut's work examines the details. Each of the 24 abilities is considered individually: what exactly does this skill mean? In which life situations does it become relevant? Which levels of development can be distinguished? And how can development be recognised?

The skills are deliberately examined separately, not because they operate in isolation but to create clarity. Their interactions and interdependencies remain in view, but each skill is first explored on its own to support understanding. This also provides the basis for the seven-step method. For each individual ability, one question must be answered clearly:

'What does this ability mean in concrete terms, and how does it show up in life?'

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