

Lost in Translation: Bridging the Skills Translation Gap with Skills Mapping

Kacey Thorne | Director of Program Architecture, Western Governors University



Skills mapping can help employers and postsecondary institution bridge the skills translation gap that often separates learners from work in their field. Bridging a language gap can be a real puzzle. Languages are complex systems, rich with cultural, societal, and geographical influences. It is this richness and complexity that make translation between languages challenging in a variety of ways.^[1]

Common Challenges in Language Translation

One common challenge in language translation is a “mismatch,” where the source language does not have a corresponding match in the target language. For

example, the Japanese word *wabi-sabi* does not directly correspond to any single word in the English language. Rather, when translating *wabi-sabi* into English, it is typically described as a philosophy using a phrase such as “perfect imperfection.” [2]

Another common challenge is “multiple meanings” where a word in the source language has more than one definition or use. When multiple meanings for a word exist, it is the context in which the word is used that helps derive meaning. For example, in English, the word *break* may be used to describe when something has fractured, or it may also refer to a pause in work or activity.

These challenges are typically experienced in translating languages, but they are also surfacing in a new way between higher education and employers. Skills have become the new currency of the labor market, and as this new currency has grown in adoption and acceptance with employers, a new language has also formed. [3] Higher education, however, has yet to widely embrace this new skills language, which has contributed to the emergence of a skills translation gap between higher education and employers.

Closing the Skills Translation Gap with Skills Mapping

At Western Governors University (WGU), we are actively working to bridge the skills translation gap through the use of skills mapping.

The WGU skills map is a dynamic network of skills and their baseline attributes and relationships that are organized to represent targeted industry and job role requirements. It is grounded in a baseline taxonomy with labor market skill language at its core.

One of the most powerful attributes of the WGU skills map is that it accounts for the contextualization of skills and how they are applied across different industries and job roles. By including a layer of contextualization on top of a baseline taxonomy, the WGU skills map serves as an important translation tool for breaking down the skills translation gap.

Solving for “Mismatch”

There is growing skepticism around the value of the college degree and its usefulness to employers as a signal of an individual’s skillset. This skepticism can be attributed, in part, to the lack of translation and correspondence between a college degree and the skills it represents. This results in a “mismatch”

translation gap between the language of higher education (courses and degrees) and the language of employers (skills).

The WGU skills map helps bridge this gap by creating a clear connection between a WGU degree and the skills it represents. This connection provides valuable insights for learners and employers alike by illuminating the workforce valued skills that underpin every WGU degree.

Solving for “Multiple Meanings”

Skills such as communication, problem solving, and leadership are cited frequently in job postings across different industries and job roles. When generalized broadly, the context necessary to derive meaning from skills across varied applications is lost. This decontextualization of the skill language contributes to a “multiple meaning” translation gap. For example, labor market insights may indicate that “communication” is a high-demand skill for both nurses and air traffic controllers. In this example, communication has multiple meanings and applications that must be contextualized to be of optimum value. The methods, audiences and types of communication vary widely between these two roles. Clearly articulating the context for how a skill is applied within different settings is critical in its translation.[4]

The WGU skills map accounts for the context of how a skill is applied across different industries and job roles. By mapping skill language used in the labor market to a contextualized description of what the actionable skill looks like in varied settings, we can provide more relevant and targeted learning experiences for our students. We are also able to add even more clarity for learners and employers about *how* a student has demonstrated a skill to earn their degree.[5]

It’s All *Wabi-Sabi*

In the end, breaking down the skills translation gap between higher education and employers will always be a little *wabi-sabi*. The level of coordinated effort by both higher education and industry to help one another speak a common language is sizeable and complex. However, at WGU we have taken first steps to solving the translation gap through the use of skills mapping. It is a major step in the right direction to better serve our learners and employers as the world of work continues to evolve.

References

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