

White Paper

Leveraging Microsoft Learning Partners for Innovation and Impact

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IDC OPINION

The success of an organization increasingly relies on the information technology (IT) organization supporting business-critical or mission-critical requirements and often requires implementing new technologies or getting greater value out of existing systems. At the heart of every organization, every strategy, every initiative, every customer interaction, and product or service innovation is the workforce who must conceive, develop, and execute everything to make the organization successful. The workforce, especially the IT workforce, must be trained and often retrained to properly lead, execute, and support the strategic objectives of the enterprise.

Recent IDC research on the benefits of role-based certifications demonstrates that the responsibilities of a single IT professional typically span several domains, and each role works with many different technologies. The research also shows that IT professionals who have achieved a relevant certification designed for their role, and the technologies they work with, perform on average 26% better than their uncertified colleagues with the same responsibilities.¹

The performance benefits that come from increased competency help the IT organization better support business strategies, but skill improvement does not happen by accident. IT leaders and their learning and development (L&D) colleagues who successfully improve the skill of IT professionals often leverage training providers with the capabilities to help design, customize, roll out, execute, and measure learning programs and frequently leverage experienced trainers and industry-standard approaches.

Specifically, we found that IT leaders most value training providers that offer:

- **End-to-end training solutions** that span the range of requirements to help build and execute a significant training initiative
- **Scale, flexibility, and speed** to support training aligned to the rapid pace of technology change for large and small groups of IT professionals
- **Value-added services** that support the learning engagement including hands-on labs, training consulting, and preparation to successfully pass certification exams
- **Quality training content and delivery**, including current and relevant training content, knowledgeable instructors with practical experience, and content that addresses skill and performance requirements represented by industry-leading certifications

¹ For more details, see *Benefits of Role-Based Certifications* (IDC #US46572820, June 2020, an IDC White Paper sponsored by Microsoft).

This IDC White Paper describes those capabilities and characteristics that IT leaders around the world most demand from their learning partners and illustrates the way authorized Microsoft Learning Partners leverage their unique capabilities and the Microsoft Official Courseware (MOC) to help organizations achieve their objectives.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Digital transformation (DX) is ushering in a new era of digitally enabled customer-facing products, services, and experiences in an environment of rapid change and uncertainty. According to IDC's *Worldwide DX Executive Sentiment Survey*,² through the end of 2019, up to 70% of companies engaged in digital transformation efforts struggled to translate business needs into effective IT investments and operational plans. And more companies struggled in 2020, as organizations accelerated digital transformation initiatives while adjusting to changing work requirements and business constraints. Organizations most often struggle because they don't have the skills they need to build and execute an effective transformation. In fact, in recent IDC research with more than 300 IT leaders, "having the right skills in-house" is most often selected as the biggest challenge for organizations to successfully completing digital transformation of their datacenters. Other challenges exist too, such as developing new applications, migrating workloads to the public cloud, and data integration issues. But each of these challenges is also significantly constrained by the skills of the IT professionals in the organization.

IDC estimates that trained and certified teams responsible for core IT activities are generally 20% more productive than uncertified staff. Specifically related to Microsoft technologies and certifications, our research demonstrates that Microsoft trained and certified IT professionals perform 26% better than colleagues with the same responsibilities who were not certified.

There are a broad set of benefits that come from having a well-trained IT organization. IDC's *Cloud-Based Enterprise Application Performance Survey* of more than 1,000 IT leaders worldwide illustrated three significant themes of benefits:

- **Timeliness:** Well-trained cloud migration teams meet nearly 90% of their business and project milestones compared with less than 50% of milestones met by cloud migration teams at only "average" skill level.
- **Insight:** Nearly all (90%) of the organizations with well-trained teams are satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to monitor, forecast, and optimize server, storage, and network resources compared with less than 10% of the organizations with undertrained teams being satisfied with their ability to optimize resources.
- **Business impact:** 80% of the organizations with teams well trained in automation and orchestration tools report being satisfied or very satisfied with the business impact of the move to cloud, while only 20% of the organizations without sufficient skills were satisfied with the impact of cloud.

Microsoft trained and certified IT professionals perform 26% better than colleagues with the same responsibilities who were not certified.

² For more details, see *A Road to Nowhere: The Majority of Enterprise Digital Transformation Strategies Lack Implementation Road Maps and Regular KPI Monitoring* (IDC #US45939818, January 2020).

High-performing teams also have greater engagement with their organization's mission and objectives.

In IDC's research on the benefits of role-based certifications that focused on the Microsoft portfolio of technologies,³ more than 650 IT leaders across a variety of roles helped us uncover how training improves performance of IT professionals. The findings include:

- **Certified cloud engineers were more effective.** Microsoft certified **Azure cloud engineers** spend 20% less time setting up the infrastructure, completing significant projects nearly two days sooner than uncertified engineers.
- **Certified cloud administrators had more capability.** Microsoft certified **Azure cloud administrators** are 55% more likely to be able to determine the scope of impact of a security issue with a virtual machine than uncertified engineers.
- **Certified enterprise administrators were more efficient.** Microsoft certified **enterprise administrators** spend 40% less time designing and implementing Microsoft 365 services than uncertified engineers.
- **Certified security engineers were more proficient.** Microsoft certified **security engineers** have 37% fewer network-related security incidents that impact multiple devices than uncertified engineers.

Beyond specific performance improvement, achieving technical certification can put IT professionals on a path to even greater contribution to their organization. Once a professional has successfully mastered a challenging topic, they are more likely to believe they can do so again. And that success feeds future professional achievement.⁴

Increasing skill levels to help the IT organization better support business strategies must be intentional and is enhanced by both high-quality training providers and industry-respected training content. Training providers with the capabilities to execute and measure learning programs are essential to developing the right skills the IT organization needs.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Essential Capabilities for Learning Partners

In research conducted in mid-2020, IDC interviewed more than a dozen organizations across industries and geographies to understand their training challenges and how their learning partners helped them meet their critical skill development needs.

The most common requirements for these organizations revolved around four important themes. Their learning partners needed to offer:

- **End-to-end training solution:** Learning partners need to be consultative and should have a range of capabilities, including needs identification and program evaluation.
- **Scale/flexibility/speed:** Partners must have the ability to handle large and small engagements, quickly and nimbly.

³ For more details, see *Benefits of Role-Based Certifications* (IDC #US46572820, June 2020, an IDC White Paper sponsored by Microsoft).

⁴ For more details, see *Business Value of Digital Transformation and the Contribution of a Growth Mindset in IT* (IDC #US46245620, May 2020, an IDC White Paper sponsored by Microsoft).

- **Value-added services:** Partners must do more than offer content, including provide access to online labs, customize training offerings, and even develop completely new training based on organizational requirements.
- **Training quality:** Partners must have access to high-quality training content, resources, and certifications, when necessary.

We also spoke with more than a dozen Microsoft Learning Partners to understand how they deliver their training solutions and get their perspectives on the process of training high-performing IT organizations. Our findings and the Learning Partner characteristics that help IT organizations meet their digital transformation objectives are discussed in the sections that follow.

End-to-End Training Solution

What Are End-to-End Services?

With end-to-end services, the learning partner can analyze the unique project requirements and objectives to design a customized training solution suitable for each customer. End-to-end services may leverage assessments to identify knowledge gaps and may also include creating a career or role framework for job families and creating custom learning pathways that might include professional certifications that reflect the organization's skill and development priorities. In some cases, end-to-end services include the creation or issuing and management of digital badges.

In our research across organizations, IT leaders want their learning partner to be able to address "short-term as well as long-term learning objectives," without having to go to lots of different providers. They want end-to-end learning partners.

End-to-end services help organizations:

- Identify pain points.
- Simplify the learning initiative.
- Reach learning and business objectives.

End-to-End Capabilities Help Organizations Identify Pain Points

The most important benefit of end-to-end services is the ability to identify and focus the learning initiative on the specific requirements of the program. "[Learning partners] listen for pain points, and then they do something about them, by proactively offering guidance and providing solutions," said Dromrac Wood, senior manager, Learning and Development, Unisys University.

End-to-End Capabilities Help Organizations Simplify the Learning Initiative

Significant learning initiatives are complex. Shifting the training burden to the learning partner can be a successful strategy. "An end-to-end solution really reduces the burden on a client's internal team. By managing different suppliers, ensuring the curriculum is aligned, coordinating the activities, and even identifying the suppliers including monitoring and managing, it really adds value," said Tom O'Reilly, head of Group Strategy, QA.

End-to-End Capabilities Help Organizations Reach Learning and Business Objectives

End-to-end capability helps the learning partner align its services to create an experience that meets customer business objectives. Aligning the development experience to support the specific learning and business objective is critical to the success of the learning initiative. The learning partner can then bring to bear and coordinate the resources necessary to achieve the objective.

"Knowing that we can rely on one core provider to offer everything that our learners need technically end to end, to really see that journey through for a colleague and their specific needs, is incredibly reassuring. We can rely on that end-to-end piece to be delivered without having to go to lots of different providers, which is a really big deal for us," said Jessica Knowles, L&D partner, Support Centre, The Co-op.

Scale/Flexibility/Speed

Our research also found that when selecting learning partners for IT skills initiatives, enterprises value scale, flexibility, and speed in their providers.

A learning partner's scale, flexibility, and speed help organizations:

- Quickly create on-target learning initiatives.
- Implement global programs.
- Adapt to business constraints.
- Stay ahead of rapid technology changes.

"[Our learning partner] listens for pain points, and then they do something about them." – Dromrac Wood, senior manager, Learning and Development, Unisys University

"We can rely on that end-to-end piece to be delivered without having to go to lots of different providers." – Jessica Knowles, L&D partner, Support Centre, The Co-op

Scale/Flexibility/Speed Helps Organizations Quickly Create On-Target Learning Initiatives

For customers, scale, flexibility, and speed are essential to keep up with the changes in business. "We've set up training on short notice; we've set up training that had to be rescheduled. We've set up trainings [with our learning partner] that sometimes didn't go well," said Henna Makol, training program manager, IT Training, Alaska Air Group. A good reputation in business doesn't come from never making a mistake; it comes from having the capacity and awareness to make it right. "Something didn't go well, but they made sure they were able to satisfy our learners by bringing the trainer back, giving an extra day of training It's always a great experience working with our Microsoft Learning Partner," Makol from Alaska Air Group continued. Microsoft Learning Partners have the scale, capacity, and experience to fix problems, not brush them aside.

It's important to clients that learning partners "have the ability to stand up complex programs quickly, providing all the resources necessary – from learning program managers to learning architects," said Todd Johnstone, CEO, Global Knowledge. "All to ensure programs are on target," Johnstone concluded.

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Scale/Flexibility/Speed Helps Organizations Implement Global Programs

Having scale requires commitment to both clients and the infrastructure essential to delivering courses around the world. Patrick Kersten of LLPA agrees: "Scale/flexibility/speed is especially important for our global customers who are based in multiple time zones."

IT requires a sizable and stable group of instructors, too. "We want the best practitioners We either build our own trainers or pull in instructors who are certified MCTs (Microsoft Certified Trainers) to deepen our bench – all based on quality with deep subject matter expertise," said Dan O'Brien, president, United States and Canada, Fast Lane. Fast Lane is a worldwide provider of advanced IT education for leading technical vendors.

Scale/Flexibility/Speed Helps Organizations Adapt to Business Constraints

Flexibility requires being adaptable to client circumstances. Enterprises don't simply have difficult schedules; their infrastructure requirements also create constraints. "[Our Microsoft Learning Partner] will use whatever platform we want them to use. So they are very flexible," said Henna Makol, training program manager, IT Training, Alaska Air Group.

The client may have an urgent need around the world or must train targeted learners who are constrained in when or how they can take a course. "When we train [a large professional services firm], many of their staff are billable resources who can't sit in a five-day class. We built a tailored training model specifically for this use case: We trained one day a week over five weeks, minimizing the impact on work performance," said O'Brien, president, United States and Canada, Fast Lane.

**"[Our Microsoft Learning Partner] will use whatever platform we want them to use. So they are very flexible."
– Henna Makol, Alaska Air Group**

Scale/Flexibility/Speed Helps Organizations Stay Ahead of Rapid Technology Changes

Speed means anticipating requirements, maybe preparing before the market is ready, and Microsoft Learning Partners are selected for their capabilities and capacity. This prepares the learning partner to serve its clients globally, in a way that is responsive to its clients' business needs and circumstances. "Our capabilities at scale allow us to stand up programs with very little runway," said Todd Johnstone, CEO, Global Knowledge.

Value-Added Services

A third important value proposition required for IT skill development projects is related to value-added services.

When a learning partner offers value-added services, organizations can:

- Create customized learning programs.
- Align training delivery with requirements.

What Are Value-Added Services?

Value-added services are those extra capabilities that are often essential to a successful skill development program: hands-on labs for practical training or to implement performance-based assessments, custom content development, training consulting to help develop curricula or skill progression aligned with specific roles or career paths, or techniques and capability to accelerate skill acquisition by changing class schedules or mixing self-paced courses with instructor-led delivery. Many value-added services are wrapped around content delivery to help improve mastery, such as mentoring, discussion forums, and assessments before, during, and after the courses. Value-added services in training also include capabilities such as leveraging highly experienced trainers, many of whom are technology consultants outside the classroom, and the ability to provide detailed reporting of the training program process to participants and managers at all stages.

Value-Added Services Create Customized Learning Programs

After understanding the learning requirements and context, Microsoft Learning Partners use standard courses or paths for their enterprise customers or customize the content or flow to make the learning program as relevant and applicable as possible to the target learners. "Our customers need customized training – that's the value we can add," said Jose Ortiz, executive director, Netec.

No standard course can be expected to fit the precise skill requirements of a set of IT professionals. Our research bears this out: While 100% of Azure solutions architects performed responsibilities related to Azure solutions architects, a quarter also performed Azure data engineer responsibilities, almost half performed duties typically assigned to Azure administrators, and a third performed enterprise administrator duties.⁵

⁵ For more details, see *Benefits of Role-Based Certifications* (IDC #US46572820, June 2020, an IDC White Paper sponsored by Microsoft).

Responsibilities overlap and are commonly part of many different roles. An Azure solutions architect must be familiar with the "responsibilities" that might have historically been the domain of security engineers or enterprise administrators. Training providers must be able to tailor courses to the specific requirements of their clients while relying on the core body of knowledge provided by a trusted content source. "[Our Microsoft Learning Partner] was flexible in customizing content and conducting these sessions along with authorized Microsoft modules," said Sudha Nilakant, principal consultant Support and Training, Tech Mahindra.

Value-Added Services Allow for Training Delivery to Align with Requirements

Value-added services also relate to the delivery capability of the learning partner: virtual instructor-led classes, self-paced elearning, and boot camps have essential roles in some organizations. "We leverage boot camps to prepare for certifications," said Sudha Nilakant, principal consultant Support and Training, Tech Mahindra.

Microsoft Learning Partners have leveraged a structured approach to content delivery, such as Firebrand's "Lecture/Lab/Review" process to ensure learning is retained or QA's "Discover, Apply and Practice" methodology. Learning partners leverage value-added services to adapt their approach to fit the client's learning requirements.

Training Quality

Training quality is also essential to an effective learning initiative. Training quality has several components, including:

- Content accuracy and overall relevance
- Content relevance
- Instructor quality
- Trusted certifications

"[Our Microsoft Learning Partner] was flexible in customizing content and conduct these sessions along with authorized Microsoft modules." — Sudha Nilakant, principal consultant Support and Training, Tech Mahindra

What Is Training Quality?

High-quality training is achieved by using official courseware, current content, delivered by certified instructors but also by taking care of every single item of the learner experience, from registration to certification exams. And regardless of how correct the content might be, the quality of the course or program can be judged only by its relevance to the target learners and business stakeholders. Quality training is engaging and should successfully bring all learners along the knowledge acquisition process and not leave anyone behind.

Training Quality Is About Content Accuracy and Overall Relevance

Just as learning partners leverage experienced consultants as trainers, Microsoft leverages experienced consultants and its own product engineers as subject matter experts to help determine what capabilities IT professionals need when working with Microsoft solutions and what to put into its courses. This approach helps ensure that Microsoft Official Courseware is as accurate as possible.

Microsoft Learning Partners leverage MOCs as both training material and the Microsoft recommended curriculum paths for specific roles and learning objectives.

Training Quality Is About Content Relevance

After understanding the learning requirements and context, Microsoft Learning Partners use standard courses or paths for their enterprise customers or customize the content or flow to make the learning program as relevant and applicable as possible to the target learners.

"We understand what our clients want, and from that, we customize our solution with respect to the content and the trainer," said Rohit Aggarwal, founder and CEO of Koenig.

Accelerating digital transformation and rapidly changing business conditions put stress on enterprises and their learning programs. Quality programs become essential. "Given the breadth of situations and learner preferences, you cannot execute a transformation program without offering a breadth of learning modalities and a high-quality offering in each of them," said Tom O'Reilly, head of Group Strategy, QA.

"You cannot execute a transformation program without offering a breadth of learning modalities." – Tom O'Reilly, head of Group Strategy, QA

Training Quality Is About Instructor Quality

Junsheng Hao, chief executive officer and chief technology officer of Yungoal, believes that instructor quality starts with the capabilities of the instructor: "Our trainers have real hands-on experience with the technologies." Experienced instructors help students in many ways – of course, knowing the material is important, but understanding what techniques or skills will help the IT professionals succeed is even more important. "[Our instructors] can model the skills needed, so students can improve to become very good senior engineers," said Hao.

Instructor quality comes from close attention to detail from recruiting new instructors to monitoring their performance in every course they deliver. "Microsoft Learning Partners have a pretty rigorous vetting and onboarding process for instructors. And, we have a regular review of quality both in terms of customer feedback and other quantitative metrics," said Todd Johnstone, CEO, Global Knowledge. And the benefit to students and the enterprise is clear: Good instructors "look for comprehension to speed up or slow down the pace of training" and can "contextualize the learning," said Johnstone.

"Microsoft Learning Partners have a pretty rigorous vetting and onboarding process for instructors." – Todd Johnstone, CEO, Global Knowledge

Training Quality Results in Trusted Certifications

Certified IT professionals perform their role better, and certifications lead to improved IT performance, and therefore, some organizations view certifications as an important part of their IT skill development program. The value of certification may come from the validation of skill it represents, because it is

recognized externally, it helps show the grit of the IT professional, or the preparation for the certification represents the right knowledge to be successful in a role.

Certifications Represent Validation

A well-built certification helps organizations believe that the learner has acquired and can use the skills the certification represents. The learner hasn't simply attended a class, watched a video, or read a manual, but passing the certification demonstrates that the learner knows the material to a depth and breadth that the certification sponsor has determined is appropriate to impact performance. "For us in the end, it's more about making sure that the certification will give us a validation or confirmation that the knowledge was obtained," said Mohammad Smadi, head of Data Center Department, Ministry of Media, Saudi Arabia.

Certifications Provide External Recognition

For some organizations, certifications are a way to demonstrate the capability of their staff internally or externally. "Certification is very important What we want to do through certification is to enhance knowledge but also to validate existing knowledge of our delivery associates in the market," said Dromrac Wood, senior manager, Learning and Development, Unisys University.

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The certification sponsor must also be recognized for building a relevant and high-quality certification. "If we're going to go out and say in our bid process that we have certified staff, the certification must be recognized," said Laura Cochran, head of Capability Development, Sopra Steria, United Kingdom.

Certifications Indicate Determination of the IT Professional

In some cases, the specific certification doesn't matter, but achieving something challenging is important. The certification is a personal achievement for the IT professional.

"Certifications encourage people to learn more. Once they achieve the certification, they will feel that is something personally for them, not only for the organization," said Mohammad Smadi, head of Data Center Department, Ministry of Media, Saudi Arabia. As previously mentioned, our research shows that once an individual recognizes they are capable of learning something challenging, they are more likely to learn more and become even more valuable to their organization.

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Certification Preparation Focuses on the Right Knowledge

While certification might not be the outcome for a learner, the fact that Microsoft builds and maintains high-quality certifications helps every course and every learner. "The context is right, and when the training curricula that says, 'for certifying Azure developers ... these are the skills you need,' the content is spot on," said Todd Johnstone, CEO, Global Knowledge.

The fact that Microsoft builds and maintains high-quality certifications helps every course and every learner.

This focus on training quality – content accuracy, content relevance, instructor quality, and trusted certifications – helps ensure that enterprise learning initiatives achieve their specific program objectives.

Ultimately, Microsoft Learning Partners believe that quality extends beyond training: "It could be the experience with our salesperson. The experience with a training, the ease of registering for a class, for example, all that comes in the quality," said April Li, head, Strategic Portfolio Management at Trainocate.

CHALLENGES/OPPORTUNITIES

Always Consider the Purpose of the Learning Initiative

A critical success factor of all significant learning initiatives is being focused on the specific objectives and outcomes of the initiative. In all cases, the IT L&D organization and the supported group or business unit must reach an agreement on the combination of tools, content, and organizational commitment that meets the needs of the specific business objective.

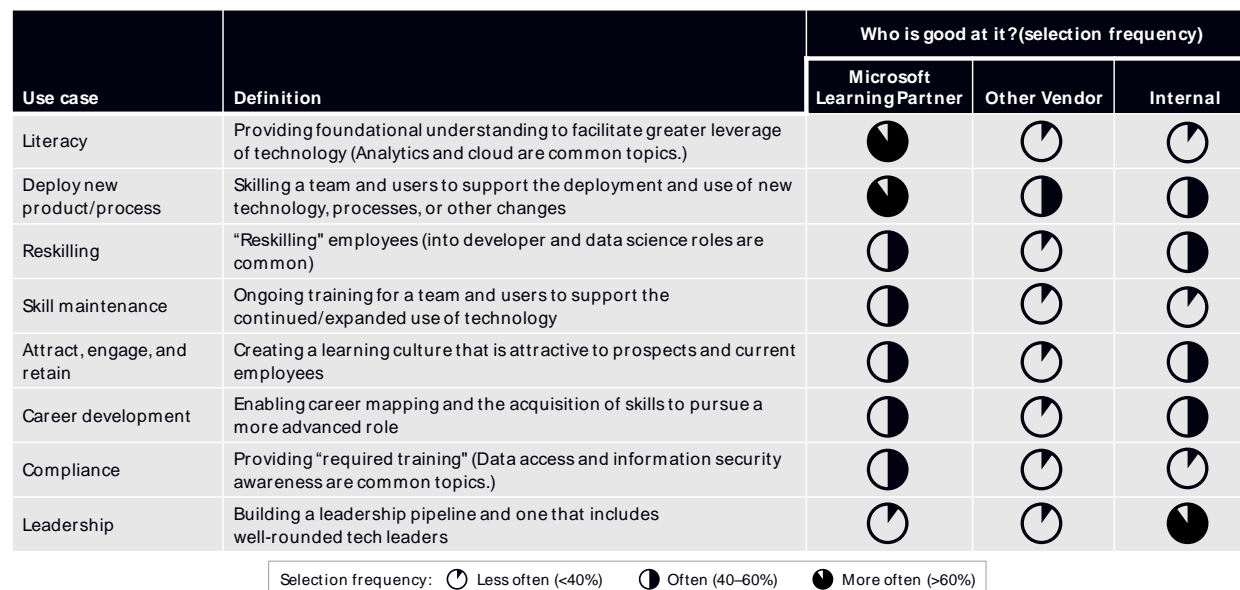
Different training providers bring different capabilities to a project and therefore may be better suited to solving different types of problems. The best fit of a specific provider to a specific project is determined by those capabilities.

Across eight common IT skill development use cases, we found that Microsoft Learning Partners were commonly considered capable; in most cases, Microsoft Learning Partners were chosen either as often or more often than other learning partners or internal training providers (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Addressing Important IT Skills Use Cases

Q. Which training source is "good" at helping solve this use case?



n = 12

Note: Multiple responses were allowed.

Source: IDC, 2020

CONCLUSION

To successfully implement DX to support critical business objectives, IT organizations will need to adopt new skills, leverage new technologies, and continuously upgrade their skills. Because business success often relies on the skill and capability of the IT workforce, IT leaders and their learning and development colleagues will increasingly leverage training providers with the capabilities to help design, customize, roll out, execute, and measure learning programs. The most valuable training providers will offer:

- End-to-end training solutions that span the range of requirements
- Scale, flexibility, and speed to support training aligned to the rapid pace of technology change
- Value-added services, including hands-on labs and certification preparation
- Quality training content and delivery

Each of these characteristics contribute to Microsoft Learning Partners' ability to help their clients achieve their learning and business objectives. And ultimately help IT organizations:

- Meet project milestones.
- Improve oversight over technology infrastructure.
- Increase organizations' satisfaction with technology project and increase business impact.

Leveraging Microsoft Official Courseware and IT professional certifications when necessary helps organizations perform up to 26% better than their uncertified peers.

To improve business success with digital transformation, it is essential that IT organizations:

- Monitor DX projects and operational priorities for new/expanding skill requirements.
- Align IT organizational requirements and development plans with DX strategy.
- Select IT training providers with the breadth of capabilities and appropriate content to meet the specific learning objective.
- Leverage IT vendor certifications as guides to IT professional development.
- Provide sufficient ongoing training and relevant certification opportunities to maintain and improve skills over time.

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