

# 5 Things Big Business Wants Students to Learn for the Future of Work

By [Michelle Davis](#) on February 14, 2020

For our recent special report on [The New World of Work](#), we asked top executives at some of the biggest and fastest-growing companies to design a high school course for their future employees. We wanted to know what skills they thought were needed to be successful in both today's workplace and that of tomorrow.

These companies spanned sectors—technology, aviation, healthcare, finance, and food service—but many of them shared similar, or complementary, ideas when it came to designing a high school course.

In some cases, we could have predicted the responses, but others were more surprising, including the call for a course on Zen Buddhism, by George Yancopoulos, the co-founder and president of Regeneron Pharmaceuticals. His course would teach students to "develop and retain an attitude of open-mindedness in order not to be trapped by conventional wisdom."

But across the rest of the responses, five themes emerged. To read the full responses [check out the story here](#) and find out how top executives at your company can submit their ideas for a high school course.

## 1. Soft Skills Are Needed

Despite the fact that many companies on the list were technology-oriented, a focus on soft skills was the biggest theme woven throughout the executive-designed high school courses. Working collaboratively, developing social skills and expert communication talents were a priority.

Some, like Maya Leibman, the executive president and chief information officer at American Airlines even proposed that high schools teach the value of kindness. Leibman noted that over her career she's observed that "those who are kind and empathetic gain followers and stature," while those who are difficult to work with often fail, despite their credentials and smarts.

For Aramark's Barbara Flanagan, the president of the company's K-12 division, a class on surviving failures and how to get teams to perform better based on different behavior styles, would be valuable. "I see so many leaders fail because they don't know how their behavior can negatively affect a team," she said.

And even though IBM is a technology company, Bruce Gardner, the company's North American program director for the Education Industry Group, said the course he would design would be called "Human Relations 101," noting "there is such differentiation today between the small percentage of students who can give a firm handshake, make eye contact and converse with confidence and those who cannot."

## 2. Design-Thinking Should Be in the Syllabus

Several company executives incorporated the idea of design thinking, an iterative human-centered design process, into their proposed high school courses. David Zasada, vice president of education and corporate responsibility at Intuit, said a design-thinking methodology would be at the core of his class, and could take students far in anything they chose to do outside school walls.

Oracle's Colleen Cassity, executive director of the Oracle Education Foundation, also said design thinking, with an emphasis on human-centered design, would be at the core of her courses. This process would promote

collaboration and an increase in emotional intelligence, she said. "Students learn to adopt feedback as useful and actionable information, and embrace the idea that effort is needed to push through challenges," she wrote.

ServiceNow's Tracey Racette Fritcher's far-reaching class would cover design-thinking, with soft skills like communication and teamwork to "help put humans at the center of work and utilize technology to free up time and allow for creativity to flourish."

### **3. Learn New Technology**

Predictably, many of the courses proposed by executives to prepare students for the future of work did focus on technology.

SentinalOne's CEO Tomer Weingarten noted the need for cybersecurity and computer skills, which he said should be taught starting from a young age to combat cybercriminals. But even the companies that mentioned the need for improved technology skills crafted their high school courses with a dash of the soft skills thrown in.

Microsoft's Michele Freed, the general manager of education experiences, said her course would pair instruction on future-ready technology skills with a focus on collaborative efforts, project management and design thinking.

"The thoughtful use of technology in context will provide the students with exposure to the ways of thinking and working which reflect the real world of college and career," she wrote.

Craig Clawson, the director of NVIDIA's Deep Learning Institute, proposed a study of artificial intelligence--how it works, how to collect data and train a computer to use AI and machine learning principles. But he added that the course should conclude with a group discussion about how AI fits into society, acknowledging that it isn't about machines replacing humans. "Students could share their thoughts on how we build a future where machines work with us and enable more creativity," he wrote.

And while the course proposed by Verizon would incorporate emerging technologies that could help students explore the solar system as if they were there, for example, Justina Nixon-Saintil, the director of corporate social responsibility, said this technology should not be the focus. The latest and most innovative technology should instead be used to inspire students with hands-on activities, she wrote.

### **4. Emphasize Financial Education**

Several executives looked at the debt load that many people carry and said a high school course in finances was critical to future success.

Maybe it's not surprising, but Bank of America head of consumer and small business products April Schneider called for financial literacy education that starts way before the high school years, with basic principles in elementary school. "Much like the way we study arithmetic or literature, the curriculum would build on itself over time," she said.

Lessons on budgeting, spending and saving would lead to discussions of student loans, credit scores and credit cards, investing and saving for retirement.

Consumer lending company Navient was on a similar track. President and CEO Jack Remondi would design a practical financial skills class to help students understand factors around college debt and borrowing. His course would include lessons analyzing college costs, creating a plan to pay for college and helping students understand budgeting and how interest works.

"It is important that the course be timed to coincide with key moments a student is exploring these options during their last two years of high school," he wrote.

## **5. Nurture Creativity and Entrepreneurial Thinking**

If the high school courses executives designed are any reflection, successful companies will be looking for employees who can think outside of the box.

Mary Moreland, the executive vice president of human resources at healthcare company Abbott, named her class "Creativity and Complex Problem Solving" and said it would challenge students with real-world dilemmas.

Adobe's Mala Sharma, vice president and general manager of Creative Cloud product, marketing and community, opted for a course on creative storytelling using any medium, including video, text, images, and animation to give students the tools to have more impact, no matter what their future professions.

And AT&T's Charlene Lake, senior vice president of corporate social responsibility and chief sustainability officer, prioritized continuous learning with a focus on helping inspire students to "find their passions."