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The 2026 Workforce Readiness Report

The Execution Gap Edition



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Executive Summary

Skill gaps are getting in the way of what organizations set out to do this year.

Managers named AI adoption and integration as their top priority for the year ahead. Revenue growth followed closely. Individual contributors valued customer satisfaction and retention the most, followed by workplace safety and development opportunities.

But there is a formidable barrier standing in their way: skill gaps.

These gaps in capability lead to a host of issues internally. Managers see problems with the quality of services or deliverables. But gaps also lead to different challenges for individual contributors, like increased workload, burnout, delayed or failed adoption of AI, and more.

Gaps are prevalent too. Most individual contributors and their managers agree that skill gaps are present within their teams. Despite this, people are consistently being assigned work that they'renot equipped to handle.

Ultimately, this creates a vicious cycle that hampers an organization's overall ability to execute against its goals. Gaps exist knowingly, but leadership and L&D teams can't align people, the work and training fast enough to close them. As they linger, the effects of missing capabilities stifle progress.

As you read through this report, you'll learn about the impacts skill gaps have on individuals and teams, the ways organizations are working to close them, and what HR and L&D professionals should consider next.



Key Findings

Skill gaps hinder goals.

AI adoption is the main priority for 40% of managers. When asked how skill gaps impacted their organizations, **23% said failed AI adoption** — the third most common answer. Individual contributors' highest priority is customer satisfaction. They listed the consequences of skill gaps as increased workload and burnout (31%), lower employee engagement (24%), and customer dissatisfaction or attrition (21%).

Skill gaps are prevalent.

77% of managers and 60% of individual contributors say **skill gaps exist on their teams**. Another 16% of individual contributors don't know either way.

Work goes to people who can't do it.

54% of managers say people are **frequently or constantly handed work that needs skills they don't have**.

Gaps are discovered reactively.

Managers most often **discover a gap** in a performance review (31%) or when a new tool arrives (29%).

Training arrives late, if at all.

58% of individual contributors can use a new skill within a month, but only 33% get support that fast. **10% get none at all**.

AI fluency is the greatest gap.

It's the skill people managers most often name as their **organization's biggest gap at 24%**.

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Skill gaps directly counter stated goals

Ask a manager what their company is chasing this year and you get a short list: AI adoption, revenue growth, happier customers, engaged employees.

Ask the same person what skill gaps have already cost them and you get the same list back inverted.

The two groups rank their priorities differently. They agree on the pattern: whatever the goal is, a missing skill is working against it.

People Managers

Goal for the year ahead

AI adoption and integration	**40%**
Revenue growth	**36%**
Customer satisfaction and retention	**31%**

What gaps cost them last year

Delayed or unsuccessful AI adoption	**23%**
Revenue loss or missed targets	**20%**
Unhappy customers or customers lost	**22%**

Individual Contributors

Goal for the year ahead

Customer satisfaction and retention	**41%**
Operational efficiency and cost	**30%**
Employee engagement and retention	**30%**

What gaps cost them last year

Unhappy customers or customers lost	**21%**
Slower delivery or products and services	**20%**
Lower engagement and more turnover	**24%**

Shows the percentages of managers (n=500) and individual contributors (n=1,500) who responded to two multiple-choice questions in the Workforce Readiness survey. The left column shows what respondents shared as their organization's top priorities for the year ahead. The right column shows how respondents believe skill gaps have impacted their organizations in the past year.



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The work is assigned regardless of skill gaps

More than half of managers (54%) say people at their workplace are frequently or constantly given projects, roles, or tasks that require skills they don't have. Among individual contributors, 37% say the same, and another 34% say it happens occasionally. What follows are a slew of consequences stemming from skill gaps, including problems with quality, increased workload and burn out, and customer dissatisfaction.

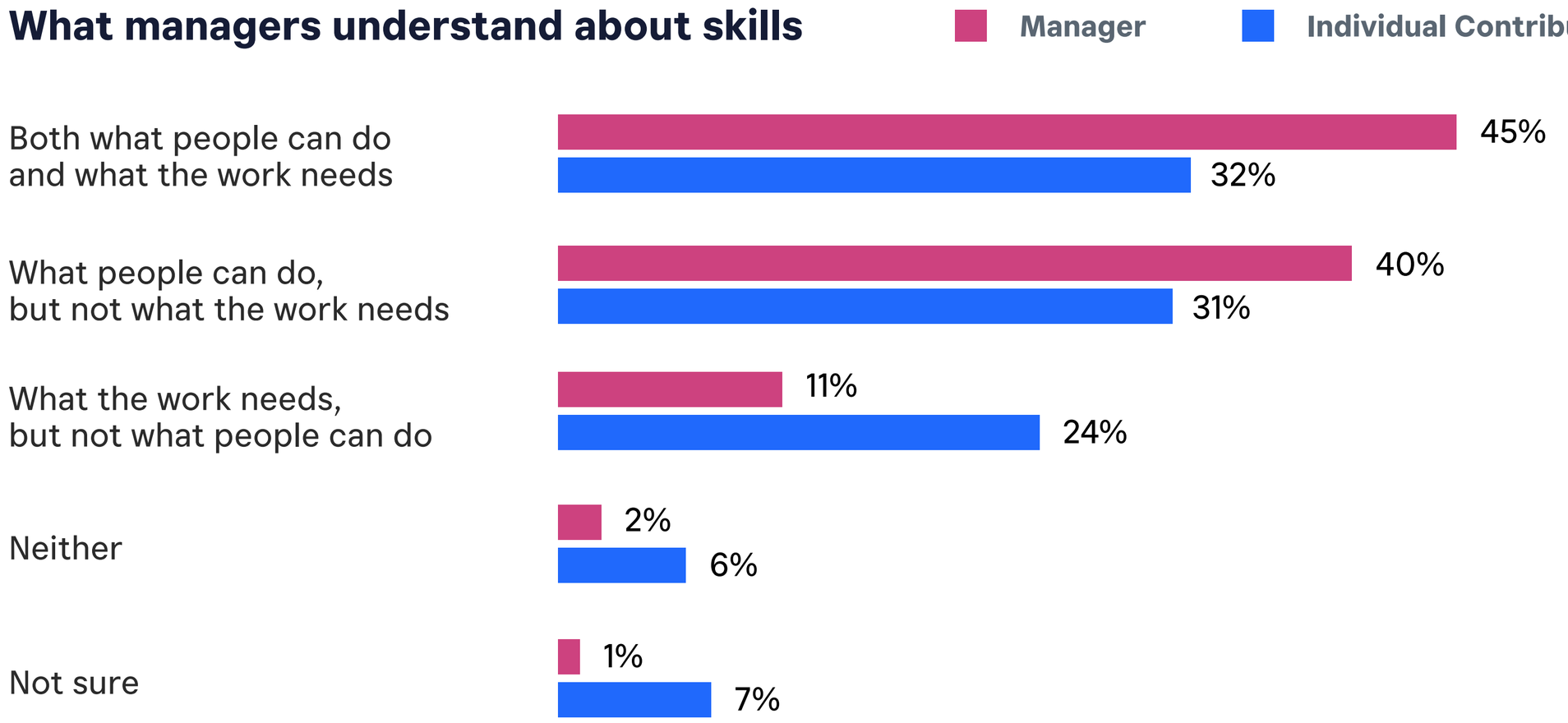
However, awareness of the necessary skills to complete work and visibility into what individuals can do are different.

We asked both groups how well managers understand the work at hand and the skills to perform it. Most of each group says managers grasp at least one. They disagree about which one is missing.

Managers say the missing piece is the job requirements. Individual contributors are more than twice as likely to say that managers don’t know what their teams are capable of.

When added together, this finding shows that more than half of respondents are guessing at one of the two sides. Either they know about the work or skills — but not both.

What managers understand about skills



Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.



Managers and individual contributors address gaps too late

Managers usually learn about a gap in a performance review (31%) or when a new tool lands (29%). A quarter of individual contributors say they learn about it while struggling to finish a task or during a performance review.

One group hears about the gap in a scheduled meeting. The other runs into it mid-task. Neither finds out before the work is assigned.

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People apply skills quickly — but support comes too late

People can start applying new skills within a matter of weeks after receiving training. For 26% of individual contributors, they start using their new skills in under a week; it's 20% for managers. Almost 60% of individual contributors can apply a new skill within a month.

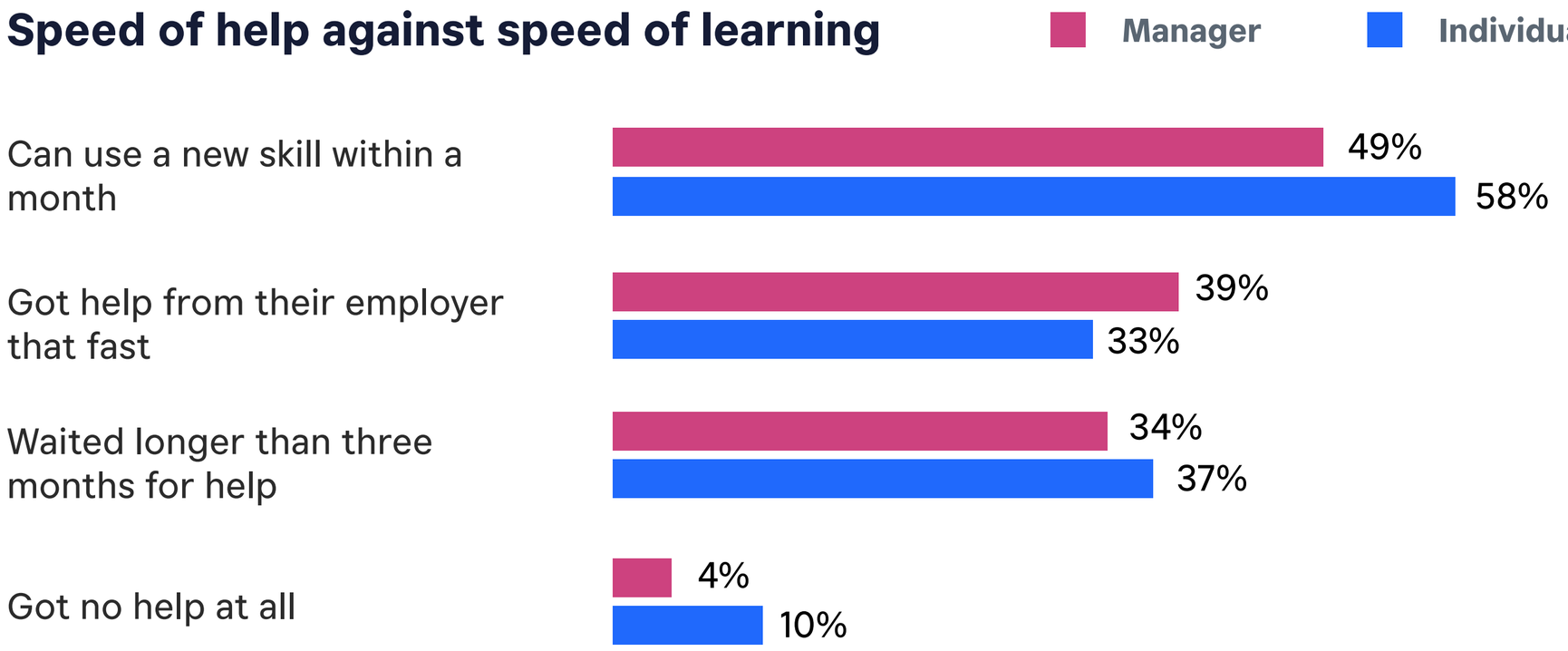
The issue is that support doesn't come until it's too late. For 30% of individual contributors, they wait three to 12 months for help building a new skill, and 1 in 10 received no support at all. By then, the work may already be underway and the gap may already be affecting performance.

Once a skill gap is found, most companies do try to close it. Roughly a quarter of managers say the company trains the people it already has, and that is the most common first move for both groups. Managers are also nearly twice as likely as individual contributors to say the company hires from outside (16% to 9%), and three times as likely to say it buys a tool to route around the gap (16% to 5%).

Individual contributors see more inaction from their employers. One in ten say nothing formal happens and 6% say the work simply gets delayed or scaled back. Another 14% don't know what happens at all, compared with 4% of managers.



Speed of help against speed of learning



Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Almost 60% of individual contributors can apply a new skill within a month. 1 in 10 received no support at all.

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The benefits of training are uneven

Almost everyone in this survey trained in the past year. What they got for it depended on where they sat.

Managers come out ahead on every concrete reward: 10 points on job security, 10 on pay, eight on promotion, 12 on a new internal role. The only outcome where the two groups nearly match is more interesting work.

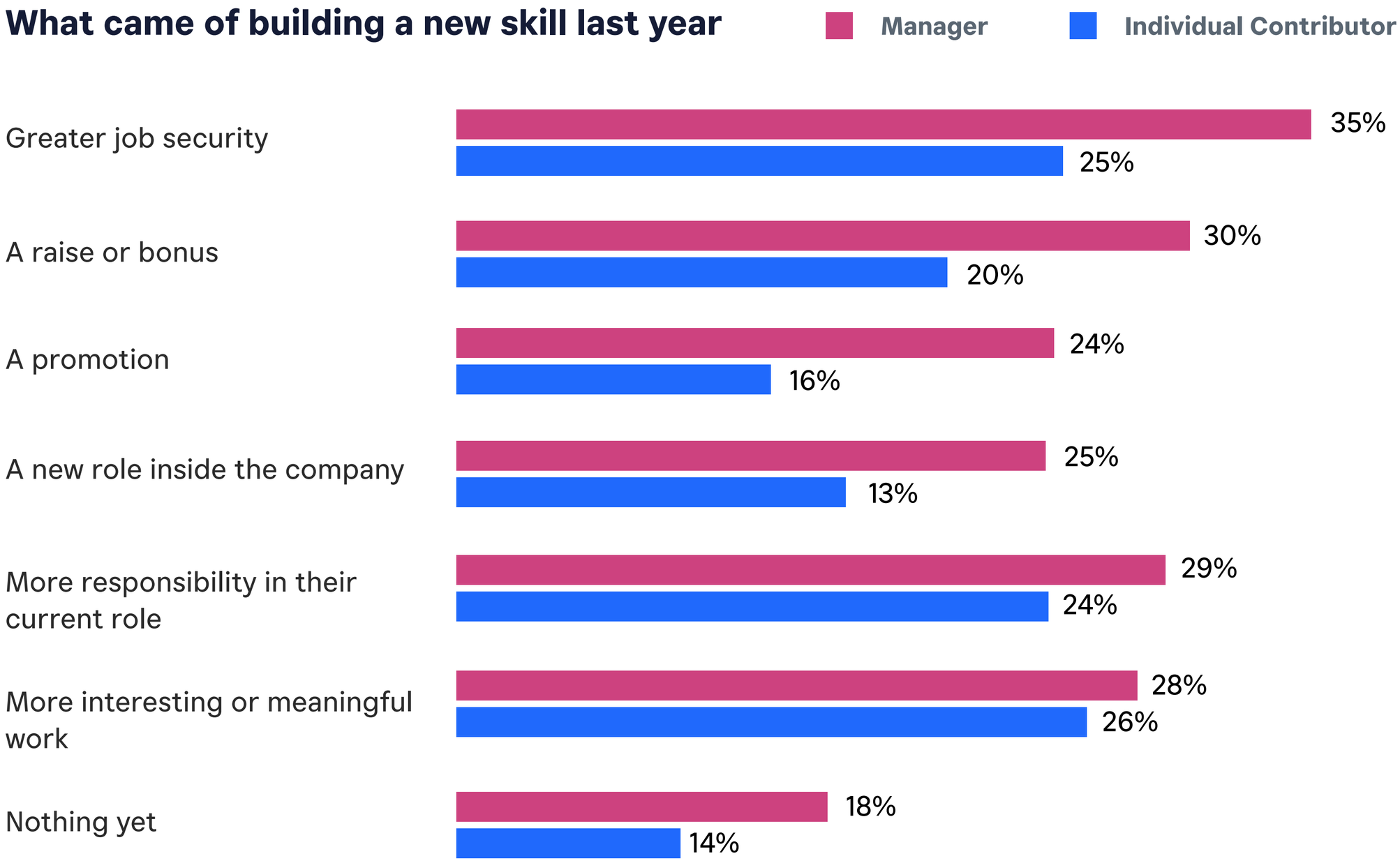
1 in 5

individual contributors got nothing at all.

10%

say their employer never followed up to see whether the training worked.

What came of building a new skill last year



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AI is where all of this is happening at once

AI fluency is the only skill in this survey that managers name as the top answer to three separate questions.

Managers believe AI fluency is the biggest gap in their company, with 24% in agreement. Cybersecurity comes in at a distant second at 8%. It's also the skill that grew most important in their own work (30%). And it's the skill they most often believe leadership has prioritized for next year (31%).

Individual contributors see it differently. Their answers split across leadership and people management (13%), AI fluency (11%), and communication (11%).

The widest split in the whole survey is how much AI figures into the job at all.

	ICs	MGRs	GAP
AI adoption is a top business priority	17%	40%	23 pts
More time managing AI tools or agents	24%	46%	22 pts
More time verifying AI-generated work	21%	38%	17 pts
Leadership prioritized AI fluency for next year	19%	31%	12 pts
AI fluency among the three fastest-rising skills	21%	30%	9 pts

The two groups are describing different days. Managers put AI at the center of the week — their fastest-growing time commitments are managing AI tools, learning new ones, and checking what AI produces. Coaching their own people ranks fifth at 33%.

Individual contributors report the rollout as workload. Learning new tools and skills is their fastest-growing time commitment at 46% — the single highest response from either group on that question — while AI adoption itself sits near the bottom of the goals they can see.

In our previous Workforce Readiness Report: AI Edition, we found that managers largely felt more prepared than individual contributors to use AI. It was among the biggest gaps between the two audiences found in the survey. Part of this was a lack of governance and clear guidance on using these tools.



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For those in HR or L&D, a gap that is named, growing, and prioritized all at once **is the clearest place to find out whether a skills program can have a widespread, positive impact on the workforce.**

What this means for HR and L&D leaders

Skill gaps stand in the way of organizations' top priorities for the year. Whether it's adopting AI or improving customer satisfaction, both managers and individual contributors don't feel fully equipped to hit the targets.

Our previous Global Skills Intelligence Report shows that this is already on HR and L&D professionals' radar. They worry that their workforces aren'tequipped to deliver.

With this body of research growing, it's clear that organizations need a better way to align capability with work and goals. Part of this work is gaining a deeper, more thorough understanding of what people can do. The other side is knowing whether closing gaps improved performance.

If it does, supporting the workforce with ongoing, personalized learning opportunities would lead to favorable outcomes for the organization. It wouldn't just show up in a dashboard as higher completion rates, but as a surge in AI use or a lift in customer satisfaction. That's what HR and L&D professionals must find out along the way.

To help this effort, stay focused on the key points of this report. Here's what to walk away with:

Argue the outcome, not the training

Respondents see skill gaps as hindering their stated goals. When making a case for training, this is where the conversation starts. The focus should be on what the organization wants to achieve and how L&D can support.

Define the job and the skill requirements

Forty percent of managers say leaders understand what their people can do but not what the work requires. A quarter of individual contributors say the opposite. Both halves must be clarified before assignment.

Find gaps before the work goes out

Performance reviews, new tools, and failed tasks are how gaps surface today. All three happen after the fact. As long as that's true, **54% of managers will keep watching work go to people who can't finish it**.

Speed up access to training

People are ready to use a new skill within a few weeks. Most employers take longer than that to respond. Shorten that difference by **making training widely available to teams and create communication channels to relay requests quicker**.

Track what happens after

One in five individual contributors got nothing from their most recent skill, and one in 10 was never asked about it. If nobody closes the loop, nobody knows how proficient their workforce is.

Use AI fluency as this year's test case

It's the **most-named gap, the fastest-growing skill, and a stated leadership priority** — and the place where the two groups disagree most about how ready anyone is. If a skills program can prove itself anywhere, it's here.

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Resources



The 2026 Workforce Readiness Report: AI Edition

In our previous report, we found that while AI use has become widespread, many workers still feel unprepared to use it as training comes late.

Learn more >



The 2025 Global Skills Intelligence Report

We surveyed 1,000 HR and L&D professionals to understand their sentiment toward skills visibility, measurement, and program alignment.

Learn more >



Skills Readiness Assessment

A quick assessment to gauge your organization's talent development discipline, with clear next steps for different levels of maturity.

Learn more >



The Skills Supply Chain™

The Skills Supply Chain is a skills management lifecycle framework. It begins with the business goal and connects it to the work and skills needed to deliver it.

Learn more >

About Skillsoft

Skillsoft (NYSE: SKIL) is a global leader in Skills Management for the human and AI era. The AI-native Skillsoft platform gives organizations a clear view of workforce capability, closes critical skill gaps, and proves the impact of skills on business outcomes. With Skillsoft, organizations can build AI-ready teams, lower the cost and time of workforce development, and reduce execution risk as work continues to change. Thousands of organizations worldwide trust Skillsoft to power workforce readiness.

Learn more at www.skillsoft.com
Media inquiries: PR@skillsoft.com

About this research

Skillsoft fielded this survey through Pollfish between Aug. 11 and Aug. 19, 2026, collecting 2,000 responses across two separately screened groups: 1,500 individual contributors and 500 people managers. Pollfish uses Random Device Engagement, a non-probability method that reaches people inside mobile apps they already use, without recruiting them in advance.

People managers formally manage others: 45% frontline managers, 24% directors, 20% executives, 11% senior leaders. Individual contributors don't formally manage anyone, though 46% informally lead work without direct reports.

All figures are rounded to the nearest whole number. Questions allowing more than one answer are reported as the share of people who chose each option, so those totals can exceed 100%.

Three questions were asked of a smaller group. Where the biggest gap sits today went only to people who said gaps exist (903 individual contributors, 384 managers). How people learned the skills they built was answered by 1,339 individual contributors and 461 managers. How they judged whether training worked was answered by 1,357 individual contributors and 475 managers.