

EDUCATION INDEX

The Workforce Wake-Up Call: AI Is Driving Urgency for Upskilling and Education Access

New Research Reveals American Workers Are Seeking Guidance, Upskilling and Clear Career Pathways as AI Advancements Accelerate

A(I) stark new reality

AI surge forces U.S. workers to brace for rapid role shifts and rising pressure

American workers are staring down a stark new reality. Artificial intelligence has rapidly shifted from an office buzzword to being embedded in business strategy, effectively reshaping roles and rewriting expectations. At the same time, workloads are increasing, timelines are shrinking, and the pressure to adapt and be more productive is at an apex. New data from the **2025 EdAssist by Bright Horizons® Education Index**—conducted by The Harris Poll among more than 2,000 U.S. employees—shows what's at stake with **42% of American workers expecting AI will have a drastic change on their role within the next year.**

Yet the real story isn't AI itself, but the skills mandate AI has ignited, which is forcing employees and employers alike to rethink what it takes to stay competitive. That urgency is measurable: **32% of workers now say they feel more pressure to learn new workplace skills because of AI, up from 26% last year.** In other words, AI isn't just changing tools but making access to upskilling and reskilling non-negotiable.

This comes at a time when workforce pressure hits new highs with 81% of employees feeling pushed to take on more work, and 80% saying they're expected to deliver it faster. For some, AI could be the relief valve—but without guidance and training access, adoption lags and stress continues to soar. **Luckily, when employers provide AI training, adoption skyrockets to 76% (vs. 25% without training), and employees feel far more prepared for the changes that may lie ahead (84% vs. 48% without training).**

Employees feel the heat to keep learning and stay competitive, but readiness hasn't kept pace.

AI is accelerating job change faster than many workers can absorb, which is why the gap between rising pressure and actual preparedness matters:



feel pressure to learn new skills and stay competitive



(1 in 3) feel unprepared for the changes AI may bring to their job

Workers aren't asking for platitudes, they want practical, employer backed training – and they'll take it when it's offered. When organizations provide the right support, adoption and confidence jump; when they don't, people are left scrambling to figure it out alone. **Both the demand for training and the measurable returns when employers invest are clear:**

42%

say their employer expects them to learn AI on their own (up from 32% in 2024).

59%

of all employees now agree AI makes their job easier—up from 42% last year. Among AI users, 86% say it makes their job easier.

58%

want training on how to use AI in their day-to-day work from their employer; 77% would be likely to participate if offered for free.

55%

say access to AI training or certification would make them more likely to stay with their current employer.

And while AI is the flashpoint, the skills gap isn't just about technology but also access and affordability. **Financial barriers remain a major brake on career mobility:**

48%

say fear of student debt has stopped them from pursuing more education; 34% say inability to afford taking on student loan debt is blocking career advancement.

82%

say employer support for learning new skills is important; 29% say it's very important, and that they couldn't do their job without it.

85%

would be more loyal to an employer that invests in continuing education; 86% would choose such a job over one that doesn't.

74%

would be more loyal to an employer that helped contribute toward paying off student loans.

For employers, this is no longer a “nice-to-have” conversation, but a skills crisis and business survival strategy. Companies that don’t close the skills gap risk losing talent, ceding ground to competitors and missing the upside of growing their workforce from within. **The upside is straightforward: build pathways to skills, and you retain your people while opening internal mobility routes into higher-value roles.**

The good news is that employees are ready.



are interested in developing new skills or pursuing additional education (up from 74% last year).



have completed some form of additional education, mostly (68%) short-term, stackable options (such as online courses, certificates, professional certifications/licenses, mandatory continuing education to maintain certification/licensure, or boot camps) that better fit work and life without adding crushing debt.

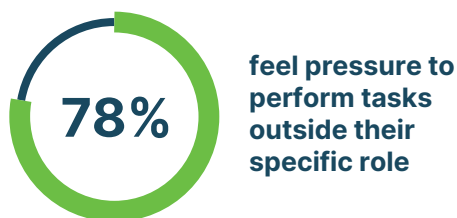
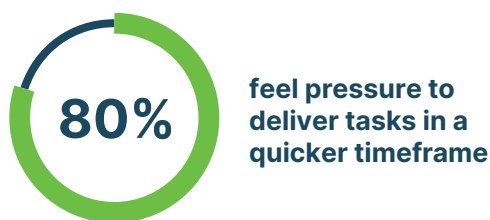
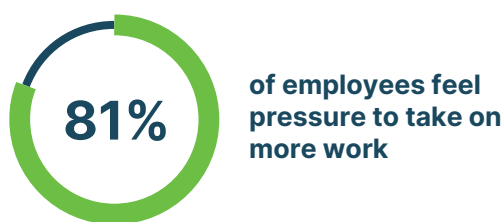
The mandate is clear:

Close the skills training gap, remove financial barriers to learning, and build defined career pathways. **Do that, and you’ll stay ahead—and earn the loyalty of a workforce eager to adapt.**

Stress, speed and upskilling need: the hidden cost of modern work

Employees face rising workloads, skill demands, and an AI learning curve that's tightening fast

Career satisfaction may look solid on paper (87% currently satisfied with their career), but the reality is far more brutal. The modern job is a grind:



The result? Priorities are shifting. Earning a raise is still table stakes (57%), but establishing better work/life balance (43%) and stress reduction (35%) are surging—both up sharply from last year (35% and 29%, respectively).

However, it's not just about workload. The skills mandate is tightening around everyone's neck:

79%
feel pressure to keep up with new technologies

79%
feel pressure to learn new skills

75%
feel pressure to advance in their careers

69%
feel pressure to earn additional certifications or credentials

Most employees (90%) say they're at least somewhat prepared to keep up as their role changes, but that confidence collapses when AI enters the picture. **Only two-thirds (66%) feel ready for AI's potential impact on their job, leaving a third openly unprepared (34%).** And the AI squeeze is intensifying: the share who feel more pressure to learn new workplace skills due to AI jumped from **26% to 32% year over year.**



The bottom line is that work is getting harder, faster, and more complex. Employees are desperate for real pathways to upskill and reskill, not just ones that “check the box,” but truly reduce stress and open internal growth paths. Without clear support and access to relevant education, the risk of burnout and stagnation is only going up.

Shifting career priorities: balance and burnout are beating the ladder

Employees are redefining success, putting well-being and skill growth ahead of traditional promotion-focused goals

The definition of career success is changing. While earning a pay raise remains the top priority for 57% of employees, 2025 is now all about pressure management. With workloads climbing and timelines compressing, employees are recalibrating what matters most, resulting in a big shift.

Work/Life Balance Surges as Workers Seek Growth Without Sacrificing Well-Being



Establishing better work/life balance **has surged to 43%** (up from 35% in 2024).



Stress reduction has **climbed to 35%** (up from 29% last year).



Meanwhile, the pursuit of promotions has **held steady at 32%** (vs. 29% in 2024), and the desire to learn new skills remains strong at 35% (vs. 36% in 2024), signaling that employees want growth—just not at the expense of their well-being.

As previously mentioned, this shift is rooted in the reality of work today with employees feeling the pressure to take on more work and deliver it faster. Layer on the relentless pace of technological change and it's no surprise that balance and stress relief are climbing the priority list. Add to that the fact that AI is spurring a need for rapid upskilling, and the picture becomes obvious: **employees are looking for employers who can help them manage today's demands while preparing for tomorrow's disruptions.**

Education economics: short, stackable and debt-savvy

Rising costs and student debt are driving employees toward shorter, affordable learning options that deliver skills faster

For many employees, the problem isn't the desire to learn, but the often-hefty price tag. Even as technology accelerates and new skills become essential, the financial burden of education remains a major roadblock. **Student debt is actively stalling career growth and limiting access to the very training employees need to stay competitive:**

48%

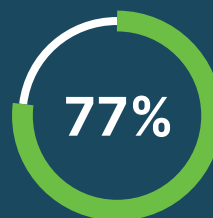
say knowing they would incur student loan debt has stopped them from pursuing additional education

34%

say they can't advance in their careers because they can't afford to take on student loan debt for additional education

As a result, behavior has shifted to faster, more affordable learning. Over their careers, 76% of employees have completed some additional education—most commonly short-term options (68%), including online courses, certificates, licensure, and bootcamps. This aligns with last year's stated preference for shortform learning (72%) over longer-term approaches (28%) and reflects the "learn fast, apply faster" reality of modern work.

Among those with debt:



call it a "huge burden"



say the education they received hasn't been worth the toll that student loan debt has had on their overall well being

The incentives for employers are straightforward.

85% of employees would be more loyal to an employer that invests in continuing education; 86% would choose that job where this is the case over one that doesn't. And because debt is the chokepoint, **74% say they'd be more loyal to an employer that helped contribute towards paying off student loans.** This shows education investment's reach extends beyond a perk to a tangible retention lever.

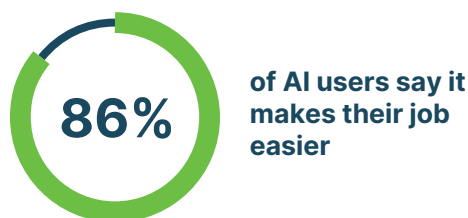
AI reality check: clear benefits, stalled adoption

Despite clear productivity gains, lack of training and structured support keeps most employees from fully leveraging AI at work

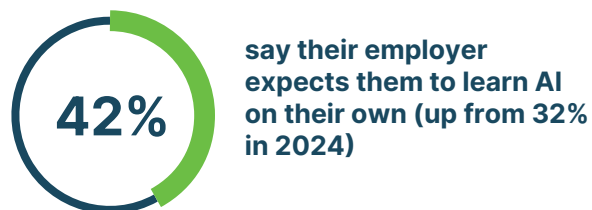
Despite nonstop AI headlines, usage is still light and often limited to simple tasks:

- ▶ **Only 50% of US workers have ever used AI at work**; only 17% use it frequently.
- ▶ **Most common uses are “light lift” tasks—with 57% using AI for communication and writing support** (e.g., drafting an email, creating a meeting summary), 51% for data analysis and decision support (e.g., finding trends, forecasting and planning, summarizing information), and 50% for thinking of new ideas and brainstorming (e.g., idea generation, concept refinement).
- ▶ **Only 48% of employees deploy AI for heavier productivity/workflow management tasks** (e.g., document handling, task automation) and only 38% use it to accelerate their own learning and skill development (e.g., training personalization, simulation and coaching).

However, when employees do use AI, the upside is obvious:



In terms of what's blocking deeper use:



- ▶ **While employees are expected to figure out AI on their own, managers aren't much better equipped**—according to last year's Education Index, 42% of managers say they lack the resources to support their direct reports in learning new skills or continuing their education, compounding the adoption gap.
- ▶ **Barriers stack up: 24% say their employer hasn't started using AI**, with 19% saying they're not sure how AI connects to their job or career, and 19% noting a general hesitancy about using AI.



AI, and the upskilling needs in its wake, is no longer a question of “if” but “how fast”—and without structured skill development opportunities, most employees will stay stuck at the surface while the competitive gap widens.

Training changes the adoption curve

Structured AI skill development turns hesitant users into confident, satisfied, and high-performing employees

True AI adoption doesn't happen by accident, but when employers make skill development a priority.

- ▶ **When employers offer training, 76% of employees use AI vs. 25%** where training isn't offered.
- ▶ **Trained employees are also significantly more likely to feel prepared for AI-driven change (84% vs. 48%)** and report higher career satisfaction (91% vs. 82%), including a markedly higher share who are very satisfied (48% vs. 29%).

Employees aren't quietly waiting for help—they're asking for it. **58%** want training from their employer on how to use AI to help with their day-to-day work, and **77%** would be likely to participate if it were offered for free. And they're not looking for theory; they want practical, job-relevant skills.

The most desired topics are practical and immediate:



39%

want to know how to use AI effectively in their **current role**



38%

want to know where AI can improve their **day-to-day work**



36%

want to know how to use AI tools to improve their **everyday life**



28%

want to know how to **better evaluate AI output** for accuracy/bias or ethical concerns



24%

want to learn how to draft **more effective prompts**



21%

want to know how AI will **disrupt or transform** their industry



21%

seek to learn how to **stay compliant** with company privacy policies

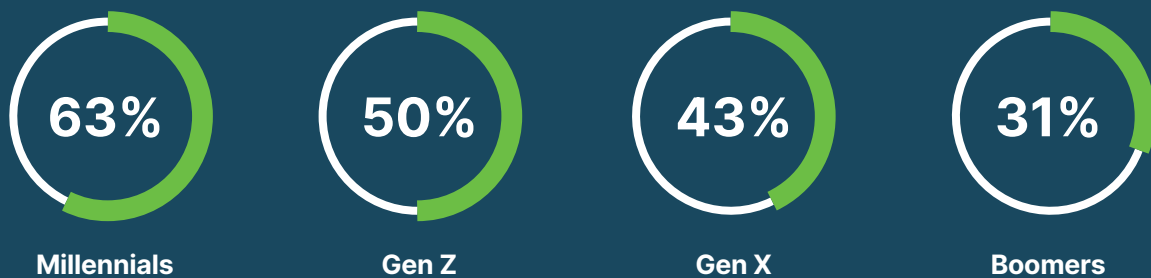
Employers that meet this demand will help unlock both adoption and mutually-beneficial internal mobility.

Older generations aren't sitting out the AI revolution

From Millennials to Boomers, AI adoption and upskilling are bridging generational gaps in the workplace

The narrative around AI often centers on Millennials and Gen Z as the tech-savvy, change-hungry generations. However, the data reveals a more nuanced story: a significant share of Gen X and Boomers are also engaging with AI and skill development—challenging the stereotype that older workers are resistant or left behind.

AI Adoption by Generation



While Millennials lead in adoption—with 63% using AI at work—followed by Gen Z at 50%, **nearly half of Gen X (43%) and almost a third of Boomers (31%) are also dabbling with AI in their day-to-day roles.** Additionally, training access isn't exclusive to the young: 40% of Gen X and 33% of Boomers have received employer-provided AI training, compared to 63% of Millennials and 50% of Gen Z.

And while 70% of Millennials are likely to say AI makes their job easier, 53% of Gen X and 40% of Boomers also agree. Expectations for change are high, too—**51%** of Millennials and **47%** of Gen Z anticipate AI will drastically change their role within the next year, while **35%** of Gen X and **21%** of Boomers feel the same.

AI adoption and skill development are not just a young worker phenomenon.

Employers who assume older generations aren't interested risk missing out on a sizable, motivated segment of their workforce. The opportunity is to meet each generation where they are with role-specific pathways, career advising, and short-term credentials that lead towards internal growth.

Key employer takeaways

As the pace of work accelerates and AI reshapes roles, upskilling has become vital for businesses' survival. Employees are signaling urgency: they want practical skill development, affordable education pathways, and straightforward guidance on how to prepare their careers for the future. Companies that deliver will close critical skills gaps and strengthen retention in a volatile labor market

To increase workforce potential, employers must tackle two barriers head-on: the lack of access to skill development opportunities and the financial constraints tied to education. For organizations already offering education benefits, visibility and usability matter, as employees can't use what they don't know exists. When employers meet those needs, they get a stronger, more loyal workforce in return. Employees who upskill will likely feel more secure as AI inevitably changes roles, teams eliminate low-value work, and internal pipelines for hard-to-fill roles get stronger.

However, to truly succeed in this endeavor, companies also need to make learning accessible without adding to the burden. That means short-form, stackable programs employees can complete without derailing their workload, protected time to learn, and skills training that directly reduces stress by providing a greater sense of job security. Pair that with debt-conscious education benefits and that will signal employee well-being and future readiness go hand in hand.



The employers who act now by embedding skill development opportunities, AI training, short-form learning, and debt-conscious benefits into their talent strategy will future-proof their business and avoid being left behind as the competition for skills intensifies.

Survey methodology.

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bright Horizons among 2,017 US full-time/part-time employed adults aged 18+. The survey was conducted from July 31st – August 14th, 2025.

Data are weighted where necessary by age by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, employment, household income, and smoking status to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within ± 3.2 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

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