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Room for Growth: A Survey of Upskilling Approaches 2026 Analysis

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Foreward

In March 2024, we released [Room for Growth](#), a compilation of findings from our first employer survey on the upskilling approaches employers use, and how business leaders gauge their success. A lot has happened since that report was published just over two years ago.

Consider some of the changes we've seen. The labor market itself looks fundamentally different from the tight, high-churn market of early 2024, still recovering from the pandemic. Instead, what some economists call a "low-hire, low-fire" environment, and what others call "job hugging," is settling in: [quit rates](#) have sat at or below 2% for nearly a year, hiring is running at [levels](#) last seen more than a decade ago, even though the labor force is roughly 13 million people larger, and job openings and hires have cooled from post-pandemic highs. Worker confidence has cooled as well. Just [28%](#) of workers surveyed at the end of 2025 believed it was good time to find a job, down from 70% in mid-2022. Behind this slowdown are structural shifts: an aging workforce, sharp pullbacks in immigration and international student enrollments that threaten the pipeline for talent, and continued uncertainty over tariffs and trade policy.

At the same time, skills mismatches and ["misalignment"](#) are becoming bigger problems. Many businesses report unfilled openings and a shortage of qualified candidates. Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming a standard tool across occupations and industries. Mentions of AI skills in U.S. job postings are up [55%](#) compared to last year. The wage premium attached to those skills averages 62% and can be even higher in some sectors. Entry-level workers are feeling this shift acutely. [Roles](#) that are significantly AI-exposed are more likely to require capabilities that are traditionally reserved for senior roles, like judgment and leadership. At the macro level, the scale of change ahead is difficult to overstate. The [World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report](#) projects that job creation and displacement will affect tens of millions of roles by 2030, with a majority of the global workforce requiring reskilling within that window. While the concerns raised by the World Economic Forum echo the ones we raised in our 2024 report about the shrinking half-life of skills, these numbers are even larger than we discussed two years ago.

Taken together, these shifts (an aging, more cautious labor market, persistent skills mismatches, tumultuous economic and social changes, and an uneven distribution of AI-driven skill demand and even more uneven distribution of AI-related disruptions) make the questions we asked in our original *Room for Growth* report even more pressing. In a world where workers feel they have fewer options, and the demand for skills is rising and changing almost daily, employers face both slower growth and a harder time finding the specific skills they need. As a result, the returns on a well-designed skill development program, and the costs of a poorly designed one, have only grown larger.

So, what are employers doing? What are they hoping to accomplish with their education and training programs? And what are the differentiators between highly successful programs and those that are just okay?

To answer these questions, we fielded a web-based survey from mid-May to mid-July 2026. A total of 629 people responded from 44 states (except IA, MT, ND, SD, VT, WY), and included representation from all industries, particularly education and health services, professional and business services, retail, manufacturing, finance, and hospitality. We also saw responses across a variety of roles, from CEOs to learning and development leaders to managers.

We had strong representation across organization sizes, with about 24% of survey respondents representing organizations with fewer than 100 employees, and 25.2% with more than 5,000 employees. About half of responding organizations were privately owned, 21.5% were publicly traded, 13.5% were governmental organizations, and 11.4% were non-profits.

While we surveyed a solid cross-section of U.S. employers, these findings should be read as descriptive rather than representative. Survey respondents were not randomly sampled, but participated voluntarily, and the resulting pool skews toward employers who are more likely to engage in workforce development and training. Ninety-three percent of respondents indicated they provide some form of education and training to employees. In other words, our findings reflect the perspectives of employers who have already made some investments in upskilling, and do not represent the full range of US employers, including those doing little to nothing in this space. We'd expect the latter group to encounter different barriers and hold different views than what is captured here.

We asked questions about a variety of topics, with specific focus on three big areas of upskilling investment:

- Internal Training and Development
- Apprenticeship/Work-and-Learn
- Tuition Assistance

Wherever possible, we disaggregated our findings by organization size and industry. We also made particular effort to disaggregate findings for organizations which indicated that their programs are highly successful in achieving their objectives.

For this analysis, we looked at organizations that gave their program a score of 5 out of 5, focusing on responses that indicated their program completely met their objectives. We compared the findings of "successful" programs against those with lower ratings to understand what makes those programs different and, to the best of our ability, identify best practices. We asked employers responding to the survey to tell us about their objectives for each program, and whether the program is successfully meeting those objectives, but we did not ask respondents to define "success."

Our analysis elevated some very interesting lessons and opportunities.

- The field of employer-supported education and training is maturing. Our data suggests that more companies, especially ones who are enthusiastic about their upskilling programs' success, are using those programs toward strategic workforce purposes, not only as retention or engagement strategies.
- Worker-centered practices are aligned to successful program design. This underscores our long-held position that doing right by workers, especially those in frontline roles, is not at odds with the employer's goals: it is possible to do well while doing good.

And yet, the title of our 2024 analysis, *Room for Growth*, is still appropriate. Despite the bright spots and forward momentum, we still see significant evidence that many employers are underwhelmed with the results of their approaches, that existing programs are underutilized, and that program design is not meeting the urgency of the moment. There are many opportunities for improvement.

This paper adds to the research on why employers do what they do, how they design their programs, and which approaches they use today. We welcome feedback and questions about this work. Please connect with us directly, or [through this survey](#).

Setting the Context

Two significant challenges in employer-led talent investment are worth keeping in mind. First, the inconsistent terminology used to refer to programs can muddy the waters. Terms like internship, co-op, work-based learning, work-and-learn, and others are often used interchangeably with apprenticeship, which is a highly structured and well-defined model. The reverse happens too: apprenticeship is sometimes applied to those other models. Second, programs themselves also blur together, with elements of all three models we focus on here combined within a single program.

Notwithstanding those challenges, we asked employers about their usage and behavior related to three primary areas of upskilling, and provided definitions accordingly:

1. Internal Training and Development - These programs are typically designed in-house, delivered by staff or by third-parties, and are intended to support skill development for incumbent employees. They also support employee retention or help employees advance in the organization.

- Seventy percent of the employers who responded to our survey provide these programs.

2. Apprenticeship – Apprenticeship programs may be registered with the US Department of Labor, or with state workforce organizations. They may also operate without registration but still follow a similar program model. These models blend structured work-based, on-the-job learning with academic or technical training that results in a nationally recognized credential. These programs are best designed for specific occupations that require credentials and benefit from extended on-the-job training.

- In total, 44.2% of respondents support apprenticeships, with 32.4% operating registered apprenticeships, 47.1% offering non-registered programs, and 17.6% offering both types. This rate suggests that respondents to our survey are more likely to host apprentices than the average employer, especially since apprentices represent only about 0.3% – 0.4% of the broader U.S. working-age population.

3. Tuition Assistance – Tuition assistance programs typically operate under Sections 127, 117, and/or 132(d) of the tax code, and are usually intended to enable incumbent employees to access education. In these programs, employees enroll with a third-party organization, including colleges, universities, and eligible training programs, and pursue a credential that is broadly recognized in the economy.

- Sixty percent of survey respondents offer tuition assistance.

We see some differences in program provision by organizational size.

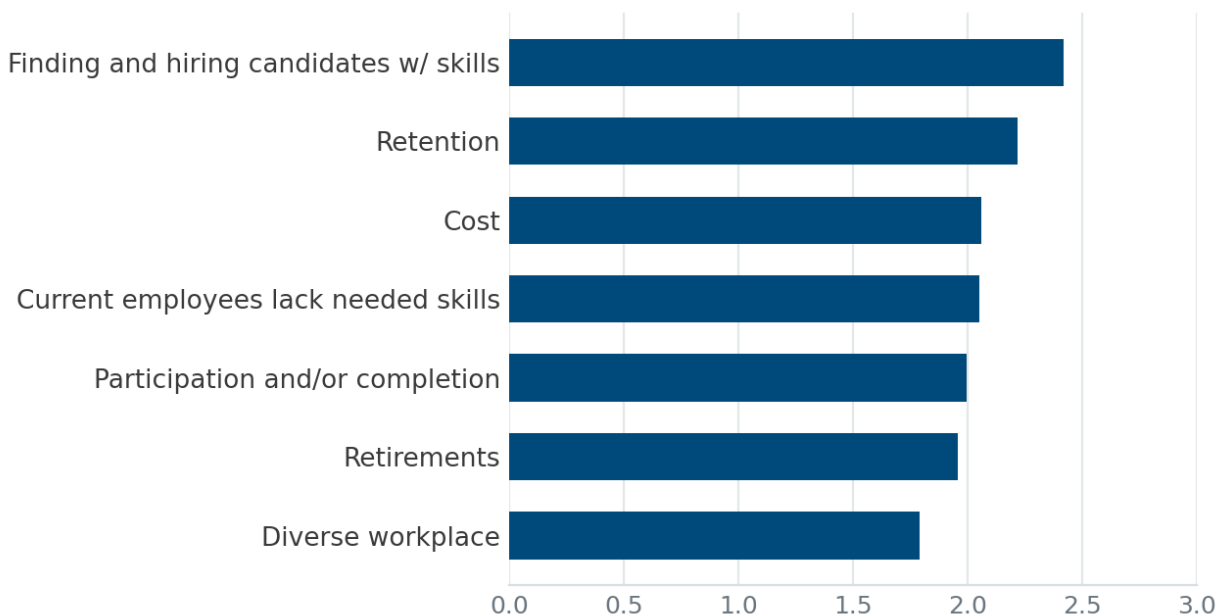
Approach	Overall	1-99 Employees	100-999 Employees	1,000-4,999 Employees	5,000+ Employees
Apprenticeship / Work-and-learn	44.2%	46.3%	47%	44.3%	37.2%
Tuition Assistance	59.8%	33%	61.6%	67%	77.6%
Internal Training and Development	69.9%	62.6%	71.2%	80.4%	68.6%

For the most part, the employers we heard from are confident that their current workforces have the skills they need to meet the demands their organizations will face over the next 3-5 years, with over 80% of respondents indicating that they are "somewhat" or "very much" confident. We see some differences by organizational size. Mid-to-large firms with between 1,000 and 4,999 employees are less likely to express the highest level of confidence. Nonprofit organizations were also much less likely to indicate strong confidence, with only 16% of respondents selecting that level, compared with 36% to 42% for other organization types. Government-based respondents had the greatest variability in their responses.

Organizations that responded to our survey largely operate in positive territory, with 82% of respondents indicating their current financial situations are either "stable" (28.8%), "growing somewhat" (30.4%), or "growing significantly" (22.3%). Wherever possible, we disaggregate findings across growing, stable, or contracting groups.

Talent challenges remain relatively straightforward. Talent attraction and retention are top challenges across all organization sizes and industries, along with skill gaps and cost challenges. Interestingly, larger organizations, especially those with between 1,000 and 4,999 employees, feel these challenges more acutely. These mid-to-large-size organizations are both the *least confident* in their workforce and the *most intensely challenged* across every dimension we surveyed against.

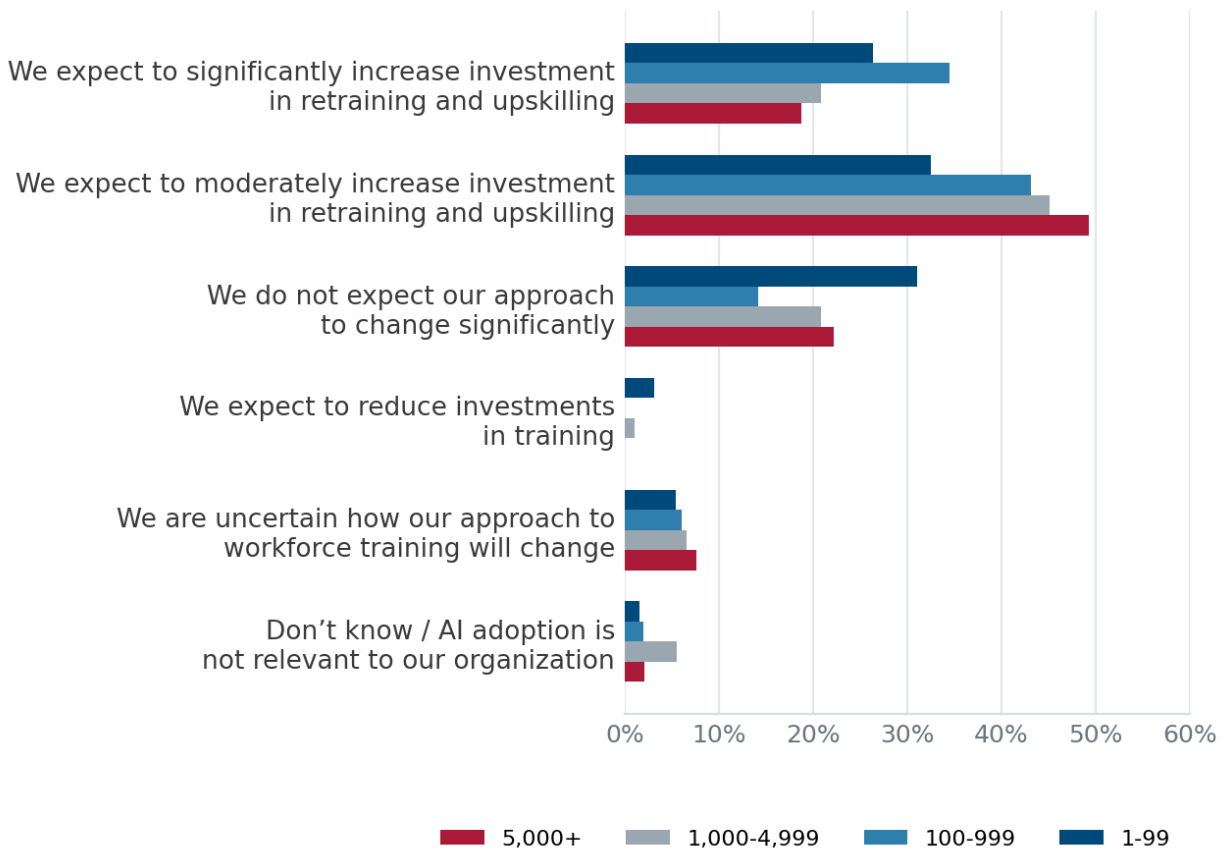
Talent Challenges



Smaller employers with fewer than 100 employees report the lowest average intensity across all of the challenges we surveyed against. Small and mid-to-large-sized firms differ most in retention and skills gaps. These larger organizations are more intensely challenged by retaining talent and ensuring current employees have the skills they need.

Regardless of size, the employers we surveyed anticipate their education and training investments will shift in coming years as a result of AI adoption. Out of all organizations surveyed, 26.4% of respondents expect to significantly increase investments in retraining and upskilling, and another 42.6% expect to moderately increase their investments. Another 21.2% don't expect their approach to change. These patterns hold across size bands, though the smallest firms were somewhat less likely to plan for an increase and more likely to expect no change.

Change in Skilling Investments Due to AI Adoption



What are Employers Doing, and Why?

As noted earlier, more than 90% of our survey respondents are providing some form of education and training, but that number masks significant variation across industries and organization sizes.

Internal training and development is the most common approach we found, offered by 70% of the employers we surveyed, followed by tuition assistance (60%) and apprenticeship (44%).

Across industries, we see both expected and surprising differences. Employers in financial activities as well as education and health services industries report the highest overall provision of education and training, 98% and 97% respectively, while information (86%) and retail (88%) trail, albeit in close pursuit.

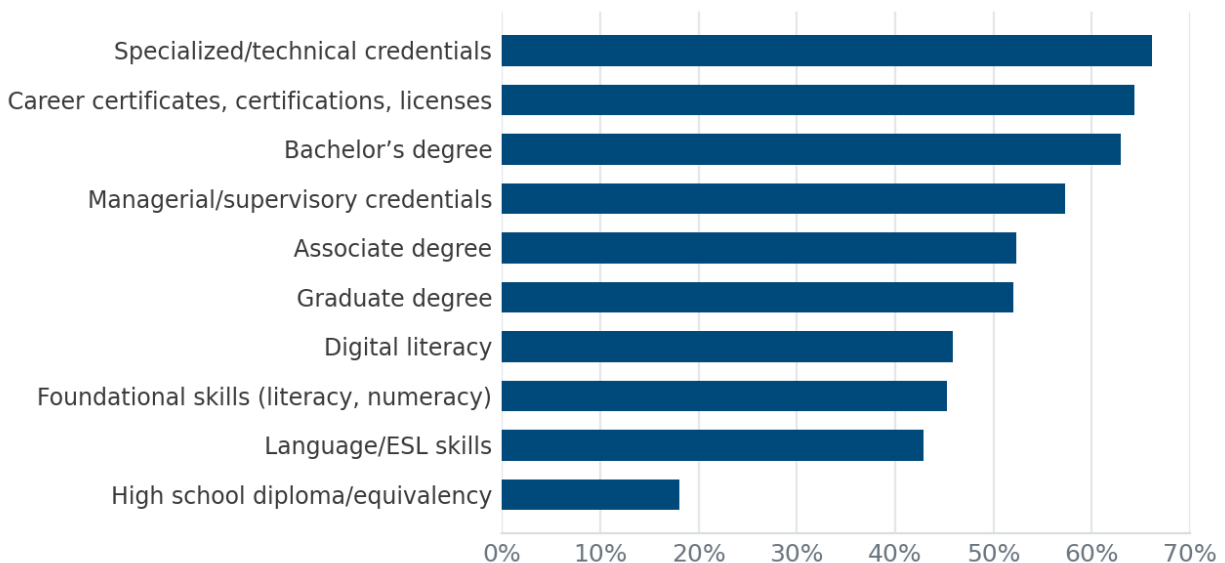
Tuition Assistance

We see big differences in tuition assistance provision by organization size. Just a third of the smallest employers, those with fewer than 100 employees, offer it compared to 78% of organizations with more than 5,000 employees. Even 62% of organizations with between 100 and 999 employees offer tuition assistance. For the smallest companies, the cost structure, requiring off-the-top funding, and internal capacity for administration can be a hurdle.

Industry differences are stark too. Financial activities leads all industries in providing tuition assistance at 73% while construction (47%) and professional and business services (53%) lag. This likely reflects construction's long-standing reliance on apprenticeship and similar hands-on training methods, and the already high proportion of people with postsecondary credentials in the professional and business services industry.

Among employers who do offer tuition assistance, there are often guidelines around what employees can actually use it for so that it results in workplace-relevant credentials. Specialized or technical credentials are the most commonly covered offerings (66.1%) followed by career certificates, certifications, and licenses (64.3%), bachelor's degrees (62.9%), and managerial or supervisory credentials (57.3%). Associate degrees and graduate degrees are offered by about 52% of responding organizations. Digital literacy, foundational skills training, and language/ESL skills are each covered by about 45% of programs. That leaves high school diplomas or equivalencies as the least common offering at 18.1%.

Tuition Assistance Offerings



Utilization remains a mixed bag, with over half of respondents indicating that less than 10% of eligible populations use the benefit. Another 23% shared that between 11% and 24% of

eligible employees use their program. Interestingly, the smallest employers that offered tuition assistance were most likely to report very high utilization.

Internal Training and Development

Internal training and development grows as firm size increases, peaking in firms in the 1,000 and 4,999 range before dipping amongst the largest organizations.

Employers report that they incorporate a fairly broad mix of content in their programs. Technical, occupation-specific skills are the most common (73%), followed closely by technology tools and software (72%), collaboration and teamwork (66%), and compliance and regulatory training (62%). Communication (60%) and social/interpersonal skills (55%) round out the middle of the pack, while digital literacy (48%) and foundational skills like literacy and numeracy (43%) are taught least often.

What internal training and development produces for employees also varies. Sixty-one percent of programs lead to an employer-issued credential, but only 40% lead to a nationally recognized credential, and just 25% earn credit toward a degree. About half (53%) have a structured advancement pathway connecting the training to a specific next role. Notably, about a third of programs (32%) produce no credential of any kind upon completion.

Apprenticeship

Interestingly, among our respondents, apprenticeship programming is the most common among the smallest employers, with 46% of employers with fewer than 100 employees providing apprenticeships, and least common among the largest companies (37%). We see significant differences across industries. Just 30% of retail employers support apprenticeships, compared to 60% of construction employers, reflecting how differently these industries have invested in their talent pipelines.

Among employers with apprenticeship programs, registration status is mixed across firm sizes. Registration is lowest among the smallest employers (32% registered only), rises to its highest point among firms with 100 and 999 employees (49%) and levels off among the largest organizations (44% among firms with 1,000 or more employees).

A majority of companies with apprenticeship programs (82%) teach technical, occupation-specific skills, reflecting the model's purpose in preparing workers for a defined occupation. Technology tools and software follow at 71%. Broader skills appear less often. Communication (53%), collaboration and teamwork (51%), and foundational skills and social/interpersonal skills (44% each) round out the list. Apprenticeship training is concentrated in specific technical skills, but that concentration doesn't necessarily align with which apprenticeship programs employers consider most successful.

Overall, the lesson learned here is that *whether* employers train their workers is close to a settled question. The vast majority do in one way or another. The more interesting questions are *who* gets *what* kind of training, *why* employers provide training at all, and *how* that training is delivered when it's most successful.

The Growth Factor

About 53% of the companies that responded to our survey placed themselves in a "growth category," while 28.78% are "stable" and 15.5% are "contracting." A small remaining group describe their situation as unpredictable or uncertain.

Growing companies offer each of the upskilling programs we describe here at an equivalent or higher rate than stable or contracting companies, and the gap is widest for apprenticeship: 50% of growing companies offer apprenticeship programs, compared with 37% of stable companies and 42% of contracting companies. Tuition assistance and professional development show smaller gaps, with about 60% of companies in all three categories offering tuition assistance, while internal training and development has a narrow range from 67% among contracting companies to 71% among growing organizations. The apprenticeship gap makes sense: apprenticeship, as we described earlier, is a pipeline tool for bringing in new talent, and pipeline building is a natural priority for companies in growth mode.

Provision of Upskilling Program by Growth Position			
Program	Growing	Stable	Contracting
Tuition Assistance	60.5%	57.8%	61.9%
Internal Training and Development	71.1%	68.3%	67.0%
Apprenticeship	49.8%	36.7%	42.3%

The most interesting, and even counter-intuitive, finding here concerns how companies are planning to adjust their training investments in response to AI. Growing companies are, unsurprisingly, the most likely to plan investment increases: 82% expect to moderately or significantly increase investment in retraining and upskilling. Stable companies are the least likely to plan an increase at just 52%, with 34% saying they don't expect their approach to change significantly at all. Contracting companies, despite facing financial pressures and challenges, still plan to increase their investments at a higher rate than stable companies (61%). The pattern suggests that organizational stability may breed complacency in workforce

investments. If AI-driven change is coming for every organization, stable companies may be the least prepared for it because they don't yet feel the urgency, not because they don't have the resources to invest.

Contracting companies report higher levels of challenge across nearly every talent issue we asked about, particularly retention and skills gaps among current employees. While this may seem counterintuitive because contracting companies have relatively fewer roles to fill, retaining the right people and closing skills gaps still matters a lot. Unlike growing companies, contracting organizations are trying to do more with less and can't count on new hires to fill their needs. Contracting companies also report the lowest confidence in their current workforces.

Finally, growing companies are more likely to rate their upskilling programs as very successful, especially apprenticeships. Forty percent of growing employers with apprenticeship programs rate them as a 5 out of 5, compared with 34% of stable companies and 17% of contracting companies. Tuition assistance and internal training and development show similar, though less stark, differences. We can't determine from this data whether growing environments make programs work better, whether well-designed programs contribute to growth, or whether better-resourced environments simply lead to better outcomes.

Who is Eligible for Training?

There is a persistent belief that training, especially formalized programs like tuition assistance and internal development, is an executive perk. While that may have been true once, especially before Starbucks launched its groundbreaking College Achievement Plan more than ten years ago, this idea is not reflected in our findings.

Of the companies that responded to our survey, 91% extend tuition assistance to full-time salaried employees, and 71% provide assistance to full-time hourly employees. A gap, to be sure, but not nearly the gap experienced by part-time hourly workers. Only 29% of employers surveyed make tuition assistance benefits available to part-time workers.

Internal training and development is focused among full-time workers, as well. Seventy-two percent of employers support salaried staff with these programs, and 76% train full-time hourly workers. Just 35% of employers offer part-time hourly workers internal training and development opportunities.

Part-time work is growing in the US. Some 28.7 million people in the workforce are employed part-time, and data from the Indeed Hiring Lab indicated that 32% of all job postings were part-time in June 2024. As part-time work opportunities increase, and employers demand more skills, these two trends are bound to meet. Excluding part-time workers from education and training opportunities may be a short-term cost savings, but it can create a long-term problem for employers who need skilled employees.

Hours worked is the clearest dividing line between who has access to education and training at work, and who doesn't. This is likely a combination of factors—companies need to keep costs reasonable, and this clear line is a way to do that. Part-time workers may also be seasonal, leading employers to want to minimize investments for employees who are working on shorter timetables.

Apprenticeship is built for a different purpose, and so it focuses on different populations. The goal of apprenticeship is to bring new talent in the door: 55% of employers with apprenticeship programs target external candidates and new hires, and 52% target youth under 24. Incumbent frontline workers are a lower priority, whether salaried (40%) or hourly (39%). Apprenticeship functions primarily as a pipeline tool aimed at people who aren't employees yet, and secondarily as a pipeline tool for shifting frontline employees into new roles.

Why Employers Invest

In our survey, we asked employers to rate the importance of ten different objectives driving their investments in education and training, from improving retention to addressing skills gaps to reducing hiring costs. Overall, skills-related goals rank at the top, and hiring efficiency goals rank toward the bottom. When it comes to education and training, employers are building programs to develop, retain, and grow people already connected to the organization, or to make sure new hires have the right skills when they're in the door.

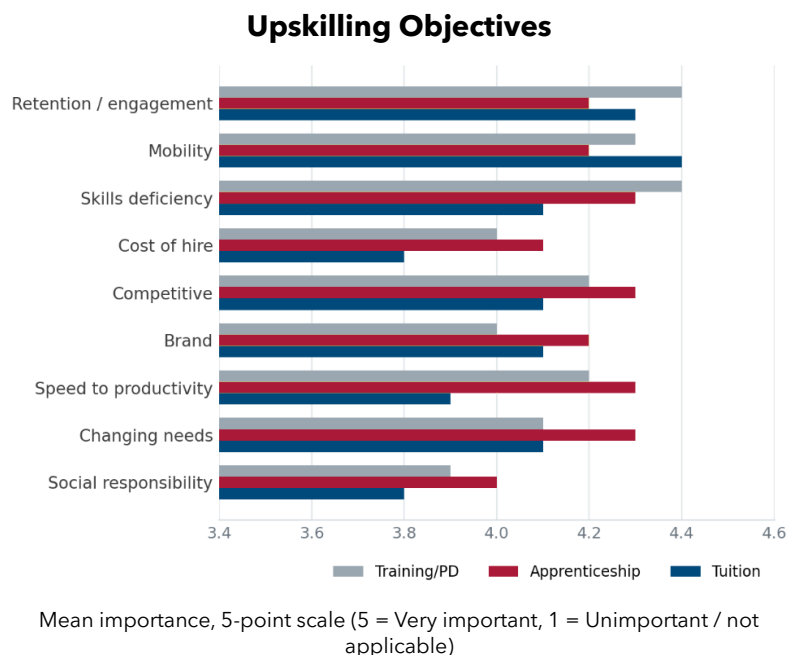
Employers' objectives for tuition assistance reveal an exciting shift. The top-ranked objective for these programs is improving promotion and internal mobility (averaging 4.37 out of 5), followed closely by retention (4.34) and employee engagement (4.27). These are followed by addressing skills needs among employees, then cost of hire and social responsibility.

Why is this exciting? While comparing results from our 2024 and 2026 surveys is difficult because we have two different non-representative responding groups, an identifiable pattern still emerges. In 2024, talent retention was a clear priority across all companies, large and small. Advancement and promotion lagged behind by a solid margin in second place. This year, mobility is the priority and was ranked as a high priority among the highest performing programs.

This signals that tuition assistance is, at least amongst some of the employers we surveyed, transitioning toward becoming a strategic program for internal mobility, not just a retention tool. From our perspective, this is important for several reasons. First, a program built around mobility delivers retention as a by-product, where the opposite just isn't true. An employee who can see a path forward to a new role has a reason to stay with an organization that goodwill and engagement don't provide on their own. Second, a tuition assistance program that funds an employee's education without connecting it to their next role leaves real value on the table, both for the company and the employee. The employer has paid for education that may end up serving a competitor, and the employee has done the work without an internal advancement opportunity that would have made the investment pay off for both sides.

Finally, this shift is arriving at a moment where it matters. As discussed earlier, today's labor market is defined by workers who feel they have fewer options and are staying put longer than they have in years. In this market, mobility is one of the few tools that employers have to grow their own talent when hiring externally is harder, and when workers who might otherwise leave for advancement elsewhere are choosing to wait it out. Employers who prioritize mobility demonstrate that they are reading the moment accurately.

Employers rely on internal training and development to quickly address skills deficiencies. Surveyed employers shared that their top objectives are supporting skills (ranked 4.45 out of 5), narrowly ahead of retention and engagement (4.41) and promotion/mobility (4.35). These programs are doing double duty, fixing immediate skills gaps while also keeping people engaged and advancing.



Apprenticeship is a specific model. Employers prioritize addressing skills deficiencies (4.33), followed by improving competitive capabilities (4.3) and meeting changing business needs (4.29). Employers that provide apprenticeships are relying on their programs to improve hiring metrics, too. It is the only program where employers highly rate cost of hire and time to

fill, and where speed to productivity ranks near the top of the list. This points to apprenticeship functioning as employers' most explicitly pipeline-oriented tool, a way to build a better supply of ready, productive workers from outside the organization, not only as development for people within it.

What Differentiates Successful Programs

We asked employers to identify their primary objectives, and then we asked them to rate the extent to which their program was meeting its objectives on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very successful). In this section, we compare employers who gave their program an enthusiastic 5 out of 5 against everyone else and look at what separates those groups on program design, eligibility, skills taught, and objectives.

We want to note that "success" here is not an objective measure. We didn't ask employers to report against specific outcomes or business impacts. The employer who indicates their program is very successful believes that, but we can't verify that belief.

"Employees who complete approved programs... are given priority consideration for internal promotions and lateral moves into roles that utilize their newly acquired skills. This creates clear return on investment for employees and directly links learning to advancement."

We also see a "halo effect" among employers who rate their programs as very successful. They tend to rate nearly everything about their programs more positively, including how important each objective is to them. We focus on results where highly successful programs differ noticeably from the rest.

Across all three models, we see three cross-cutting findings.

1. Programs that connect training to a defined next step are consistently elevated as successful. Among tuition assistance programs, 74% of employers that rated their programs highly had built structured advancement pathways connecting whatever learning the employee was doing to the next role, compared to just 43% of those that didn't rate their programs as highly. This is a 31-percentage-point gap and is the single largest differentiator of success. Professional development and training show the same pattern. Top programs had structured advancement pathways (67%), compared to 46% of others. Eighty-nine percent of top-rated apprenticeship programs always or usually advance completers into full-time roles, compared with 71% of other programs.

2. Foundational and durable skills differentiate success more than technical skills do. In apprenticeship programs, nearly every program teaches technical, occupation-specific skills. What differentiates top-rated apprenticeship programs is what happens around the technical

training core. Programs that emphasize foundational and durable skills are far more likely to be rated as successful. Those foundational skills include literacy and numeracy (+22 points), collaboration and teamwork (+19 points), and technology tools (+16 points). Internal training and development shows the same pattern. Technical training is common across the board, and there aren't significant differences in provision between the programs that are rated as highly successful and the others. Real gaps show up when employers provide technology tools (+10 points) and foundational skills (+9 points). In 2026, UpSkill America began developing a series on foundational skills. To learn more, read our first paper in the series, ["Foundational Skills: Early Insights from Employers and Providers."](#)

"Our most effective practice, which has garnered the most positive outcomes, are our efforts to fill in basic educational gaps in written and verbal communication lacking in many of our employees."

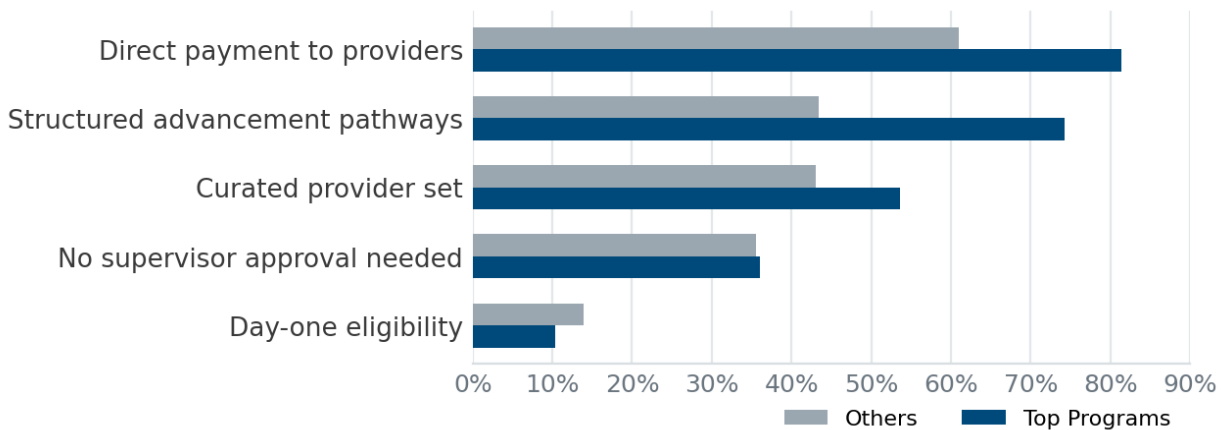
3. Several of the key practices elevated in our 2024 survey don't show up here. Day-one tuition assistance eligibility, for example, was not associated with highly successful programs in our current analysis, and eliminating supervisor approval requirements in tuition assistance programs showed no meaningful association with success. This is in spite of our 2024 finding that day-one eligibility was roughly 2.5 times more common among successful programs. Apprenticeship registration status showed a similar pattern. Registered-only programs made up 40% of successful programs vs. 43% of others, whereas 2024 found registered programs about 25% more likely to be rated as successful. We don't read this as evidence that those practices don't matter. Rather, it could signal that these practices have already been adopted widely enough that they no longer separate strong programs from weak ones, or that other design choices now matter more.

We also see specific practices within the three upskilling models that have emerged as indicators of success.

Tuition Assistance

Two design choices stand out in our tuition assistance data. The first is direct payment. Eighty-one percent of top-rated programs pay tuition directly to the education provider, rather than requiring employees to pay upfront and wait for reimbursement. That is compared to 61% of lower-rated programs. The second finding is that structured advancement pathways, described in the previous section, are the largest single differentiator we found.

Success Factors: Tuition Assistance



Another differentiator shows up in what employees study. Top-rated programs are substantially more likely to cover digital literacy (62% vs. 43%) and foundational skills (61% vs. 42%), and substantially less likely to cover bachelor's degrees (51% vs. 68%) or graduate degrees (40% vs. 56%). Shorter-form and skills-focused programs are emerging as valuable for employers. It's possible that employers find it hard to see the value of degree-focused programs in this labor market. Degrees take years, completion is often uncertain, and the connection between some degrees and specific jobs is often indirect, whereas short-term credentials produce visible results on a timeline an employer can observe. It's also possible employers are concerned that a degree gives an employee more leverage to leave.

All of that said, we encourage employers to look hard at their own workforce needs, and not to abandon education pathways that can help employees fulfill their professional and personal goals. The [wage premium](#) for college graduates is still nearly 75% over those with a high school diploma, showing that employers still value employees with degrees.

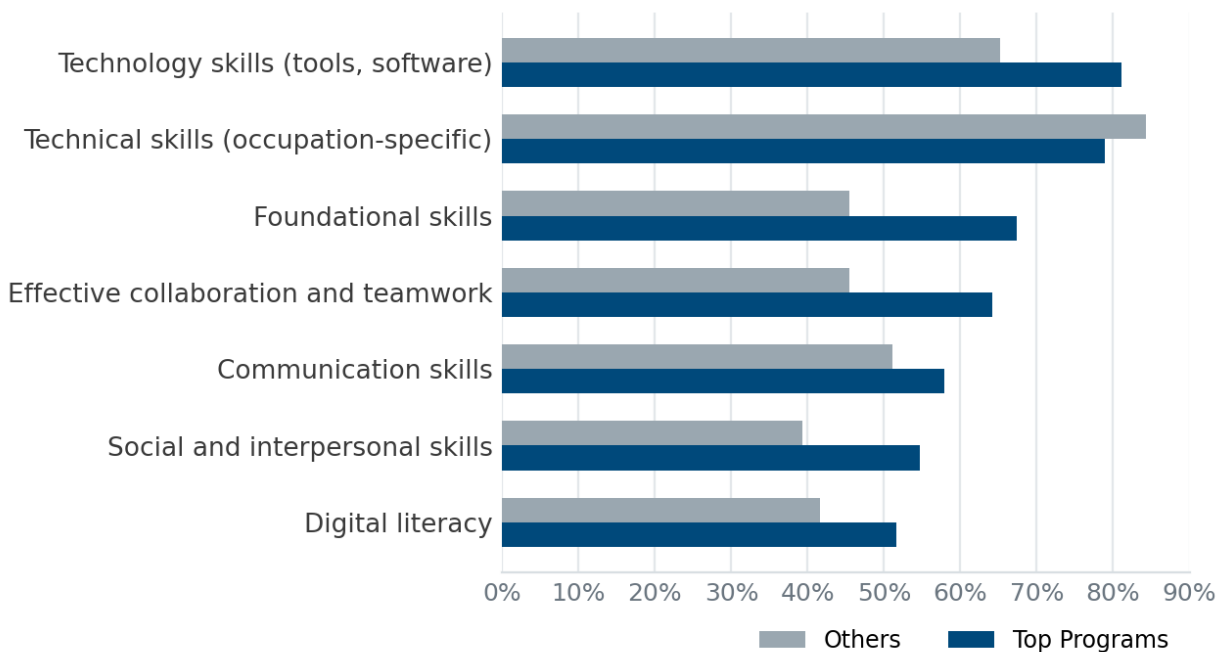
"Our most effective practice is removing upfront financial barriers through direct billing partnership with educational institutions rather than the traditional reimbursement method. This approach significantly increases program participation across all employee tiers by eliminating out of pocket costs and making upskilling genuinely accessible to our entire workforce."

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship's clearest signal of success happens after the program ends. Nearly 90% of top-rated apprenticeship programs always or usually advance completers into full-time roles, compared with 71% of other programs. Top-rated programs also report completion rates above 75% at 1.5 times that of lower-rated programs (42.1% vs. 27.5%).

As previously noted, highly successful programs differed from others by which skills they prioritized. Highly successful programs were more likely to focus on foundational skills, collaboration and teamwork, social and interpersonal skills, and technology skills, while we observed small or even negative gaps for technical skills.

Success Factors - Apprenticeship

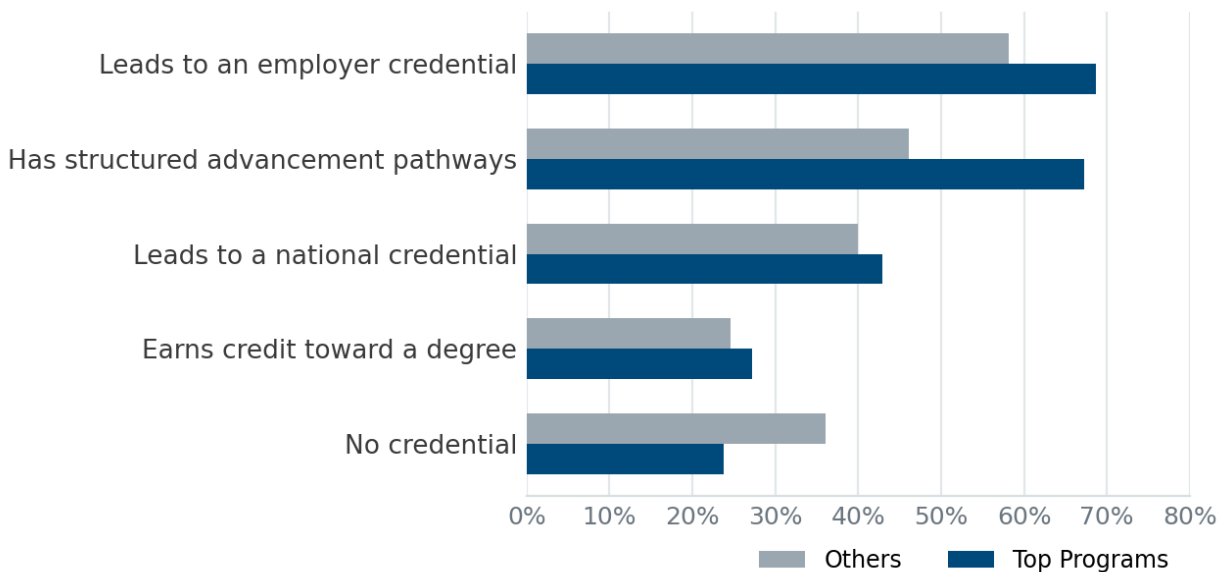


Two commonly cited design choices we surveyed against did not show meaningful differences between top-rated and other programs. Registration status (whether a program is registered with the U.S. Department of Labor or the state) showed the same results across highly successful and other programs (40% vs. 43%). Using an intermediary partner to help administer the program also made no difference, with 66% of both top-rated and other programs indicating they use a partner. Neither finding means these practices contribute to less successful programs, but our data offers no evidence that they separate strong apprenticeship programs from weaker ones.

Internal Training and Development

Structured advancement pathways are the strongest differentiator of successful development programs (67% of top programs vs. 46% of others). Further, top-rated programs are much more likely to lead to an employer-issued credential (69% vs. 58%) and less likely to leave employees with no credential at all (24% vs 36%). Programs that produce something tangible, whether that's a defined next step on an advancement pathway or an external signal of competency, are consistently rated more successful than programs that just deliver training.

Success Factors - Internal Training and Development



Eligibility for development programs is roughly equivalent across different employee populations, with no big differences between top-rated and other programs, except for one employee group. Supervisors and managers are eligible to participate in 73% of top-rated programs compared to 62% of others. Internal training and development that reaches the supervisory layer, not just individual contributors or leadership, is more likely to be rated successful. It may be that manager buy-in makes a program work in practice, or that manager development is where returns on training and development show up most visibly. It may also be that companies that recognize the [unique stresses](#) experienced by employees within the middle of organizations see benefits. Either way, the middle layer of the organization is where success from this model is concentrated.

The Non-Training Employer: What We Learned

The vast majority of respondents to our survey, 94.4%, indicated they offer employees some form of training and education. But 5.6% (35) of our respondents reported they offer none. That's a small group, and because of the selection bias we noted earlier, we're confident that more than 7% of employers in the broader economy fit this description. Nonetheless, this group offers some insights.

Non-training employers in our sample are small and privately held. Forty percent of respondents in this category had fewer than 100 employees, and another 40% had between 100 and 999 employees. Privately held companies make up 80% of this category, compared with 52% of responding companies that offer training.

Non-training employers are less likely to require a degree for hiring: 74% of non-training employers say degrees are not required for most roles, compared to 50% of employers that offer training. These employers generally don't hire for credentials, and don't offer upskilling once someone is employed. A good portion of this group, 65%, recognizes this is a problem, indicating that they'd like to offer training but face barriers or are early in the development of their programs.

We asked these employers to rate the impact of the barriers they face, and responses point to resources rather than skepticism. They primarily highlighted that these programs were cost-prohibitive and offered limited benefits compared to cost. Insufficient time or internal capacity followed closely behind. The barriers that were ranked as the least important were prior training efforts that had produced poor outcomes, and available options that felt overwhelming or hard to navigate.

In Their Own Words: What Employers Elevate

After completing the data collection questions, employers were asked to tell us what they viewed as their organization's best practice, in their own words. Three themes surfaced:

Integration is key. The biggest common theme across the more than 500 open-ended responses we received was integration, and the importance of removing silos in service of better outcomes. Employers described blending all three models into a continuous system rather than supporting three distinct models, and they used some common language: learning "connected to a clear, flexible pathway," and training that's "not offered as a general benefit only" but tied to skill gaps and advancement. Our quantitative data backs up this theme, showing structured advancement pathways as the strongest differentiator of highly ranked programs. "One of our most effective practices is intentionally aligning employee development investments with workforce needs rather than offering standalone programs. We take a talent pipeline approach that connects tuition assistance, apprenticeships, internships, skills development, and internal mobility into a broader workforce strategy."

Removing financial friction. Employers described how tuition reimbursement models are a real source of friction, both for the company and for the learning worker. They described switching to direct payment approaches in terms of equity and access: eliminating "upfront financial barriers" so a program becomes "genuinely accessible to our entire workforce." This, too, underscores our finding showing that successful tuition assistance programs are 20 percentage points more likely to support direct payments.

People make training work. Mentorship showed up in a significant number of open-ended responses, more often than any specific programmatic design element. Employers point to a formal year-long mentorship program for new hires, an apprentice paired with a senior

advisor, or even just "manager support." Very few of the responses we fielded described a successful program or best practice in purely program terms. They more often describe it as a relationship, where a mentor, supervisor, or advisor reinforces the lessons learned and helps employees connect learning to their next career step.

"Our mentors-matching program is one of our most effective practices. We pair every apprentice with a senior for coaching and guidance, ensuring safe and reliable skills transfer."

Insights and Conclusions

The field of upskilling happens largely behind closed doors. Employers are making decisions every day about what they need, how they will deliver it, who gets it, and what gets measured, and those decisions are rarely shared outside the organization that makes them. This survey attempts to provide the field with evidence about what practices and methods work best, shedding some light on the internal practices that produce the greatest success.

From our perspective, three big insights emerged from this survey:

- **The shift toward mobility matters.** Across all three program areas we studied, structured pathways for advancement are the clear differentiator between the most successful programs and the rest. These consistent findings across three very different program types indicate that training that doesn't lead somewhere specific underperforms training that does. A retention-focused program treats turnover as the primary problem, and training as a tool to solve it. A mobility-first approach treats the employee's growth as the goal, and retention becomes one of several benefits that follow from getting that right. That difference changes what employers measure, what they build, and who they build for, and it changes the employee's experience, especially now as the future becomes much less predictable.
- **Worker-centered design leads to results.** It would be easy to assume that employers, left to their own devices, would gravitate toward providing education and training opportunities that are the least expensive and easiest to run. But our data suggests the opposite. The features most associated with success—direct payment, structured pathways, reaching supervisors specifically—are the features that ask the most of the employer and give the most to the employee. This underscores our 2024 findings. When designing education and training programs that actually work, win-win opportunities abound. Centering employees and their needs is good business practice.
- **Learning should be portable.** The best evidence for portable records of learning is visible in our data. Top-rated internal training programs are more likely to end in a credential than other programs (69% vs. 58%) and less likely to leave employee with

nothing to show (24% vs. 36%). Employers who have built strong programs understand that giving employees evidence of their skills through a credential or other portable record is important. When employees are anxious and employers are planning for an uncertain future, giving employees a record they can carry with them, not just something their current employer may recognize, is the right thing to do.

Finally, there is still room for growth. As in 2024, we titled this report deliberately. The bright spots in these findings are real. We're seeing mobility take center stage, worker-centered design contributing to success, and employers doubling down on providing these programs. However, the problems we identified a couple of years ago haven't gone away. Uneven access, low utilization, and learning and credentials that don't travel are still holding programs back, and a fast-changing skills landscape and a transforming labor market make the cost of leaving them unaddressed even higher. The employers who close these gaps first won't just be doing right by their workers and their organizations. They'll be the ones best prepared for whatever comes next.

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