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Room for Growth 2026 Analysis

Foundational Skills: National Survey Findings

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The Aspen Institute

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Earlier this year, we released findings from our 2026 Room for Growth survey, which focused on the upskilling approaches that employers use in their organizations, and the metrics leaders use to gauge the success of those programs. In the summer of 2026, we surveyed more than 600 employers across the nation representing all major industries and 42 states. We were specifically interested in how foundational skills show up in employers' programs and priorities.

Foundational skills (literacy, numeracy, English and language learning, digital literacy, and critical thinking) are the literal foundations of future learning, but they often don't fit neatly into any single program category. Foundational skills appear in the survey findings as a component of tuition assistance offerings, as a differentiating factor in successful apprenticeship programs, and as a common thread in internal training and development curricula. Foundational skills programming is also offered by most employers who responded to our survey.

This paper looks specifically at what we know about how employers consider foundational skills training: who offers it, what it covers, how it's delivered, and what separates the most successful programs from the rest. Several broad lessons are worth highlighting up front. First, foundational skills training is offered at similar rates across nearly every industry and organization size that responded to our survey, which differs significantly from other upskilling models we discussed in our initial paper. Second, the foundational skills that differentiate the most successful programs aren't necessarily the ones that grab the most attention. For example, digital literacy shows no relationship to program success at all, while the academic basics, numeracy and literacy, are the clearest differentiators we see. Third, and not surprisingly, foundational skills programming is intended to address skills deficiencies rather than positioning people for retention or mobility.

We hope this paper adds useful, evidence-backed findings to a category of training that often gets treated as a footnote to bigger, better-funded programs. We welcome feedback and questions about this work. Please connect with us directly, or through this survey.

Setting the Context

In this paper, we use the term "foundational skills" to cover five specific skill areas: literacy (reading and writing), numeracy and mathematics, critical thinking, English and other language learning, and digital literacy. Employers that indicated they offer support in any one of these skill areas through a distinct program, separate from another upskilling model, are counted here as foundational skills providers.

Fifty-nine percent of the employers we surveyed offer foundational skills training. Unlike other models we examined, foundational skills training provision differs very little across organizational sizes. However, there is still some slight variation: 49% of the smallest

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companies, 56% of companies with 100-999 employees, and about 52% of companies with over 1,000 employees provide foundational skills training. Growth trajectory tells a slightly different story. Growing companies offer foundational skills at a higher rate (58%) than stable companies (46%), with contracting companies hovering in the middle (52%). This pattern echoes what we see elsewhere in this survey series: companies that are actively growing appear more attentive to workforce training and development across the board, while stability seems to correspond with complacency.

Table 1. Share of employers offering foundational skills training, by organization size

Organization size	Share offering
1–99 employees	49%
100–999 employees	56%
1,000+ employees	About 52%

Table 2. Share of employers offering foundational skills training, by growth trajectory

Growth trajectory	Share offering
Growing	58%
Stable	46%
Contracting	52%

We also see relatively little difference in provision of training across industries. Leisure and hospitality and trade, transportation, and utilities offer training at the highest rates, 59.5% and 56.4%, respectively. Retail and professional and business services come in at the lowest rates, 49.3% and 46% respectively.

What Are Employers Doing, and Why?

Among employers who offer foundational skills training, the focus is on building the critical thinking skills employees need to use information effectively. Critical thinking is offered by 77% of foundational skills programs. Digital literacy comes next at 51%, followed by literacy (47%), numeracy (42%), English language (35%), and other language learning (19%).

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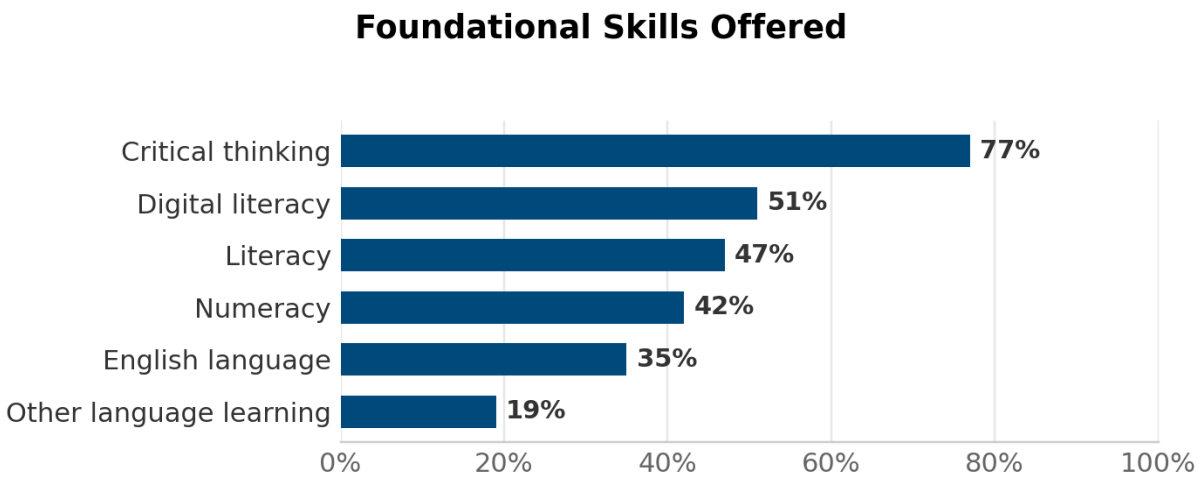


Figure 1. Share of foundational skills programs that offer each skill.

This is an area where we see some differences across industries. As noted above, broad provision of foundational skills is roughly equal across industries. But the focus of each training differs.

- Critical thinking is the most dominant skill, especially in the construction and information industries.
- Numeracy shows the largest difference across industries. Among retailers that provide foundational skills training, 61% offer numeracy training, compared with just 24% in the leisure and hospitality industry. This reflects the reality of each industry. Retail involves significant transactions, register handling, and inventory, while hospitality's frontline roles lean less on math and more on service interaction, which explains why hospitality leads other industries in English language learning (52%).
- Digital literacy differs significantly across industries. Professional and business services (60%) and education and health services (61%) lead in providing training for this skill, while construction offers digital literacy training 25% of the time.
- Literacy training is highest in the information (65%) and leisure and hospitality (60%) industries, and lowest in education and health services (39%).

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Table 3. Share of employers with foundational skills programs that offer each skill, by industry

Industry	Literacy	Numeracy	Critical thinking	English language	Digital literacy
Education & Health Services	38%	39%	78%	31%	61%
Professional & Business Services	40%	40%	71%	37%	60%
Manufacturing	44%	38%	71%	32%	32%
Retail	58%	61%	73%	39%	55%
Financial Activities	47%	53%	77%	27%	50%
Leisure & Hospitality	60%	24%	84%	52%	36%
Trade, Transport, & Utilities	41%	36%	77%	36%	50%
Information	65%	50%	85%	45%	45%
Construction	56%	44%	94%	38%	25%

Training is delivered in a variety of ways. Seventy-five percent of foundational skills programs are delivered internally. National intermediary partners are used by 40% of programs, and 38% use local intermediaries, community colleges, adult education providers, and similar organizations. High school diploma or equivalency programs are comparatively rare, appearing in just 15% of programs.

Broadly speaking, foundational skills programs are likely to be built and delivered in-house, oriented toward critical thinking, and supplemented with the specific skills needed by the employer, largely reflecting the industry's needs.

Why Employers Invest

We asked employers offering foundational skills training to rate the importance of nine different goals behind their investments, from improving retention to addressing skills deficiencies to reducing the cost of hiring.

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Addressing skills deficiencies is the clear top objective (4.44 out of 5), well ahead of meeting changing business needs (4.3), retention and engagement (4.26), and promotion and mobility (4.24). Cost of hire and time to fill rank last (3.93).

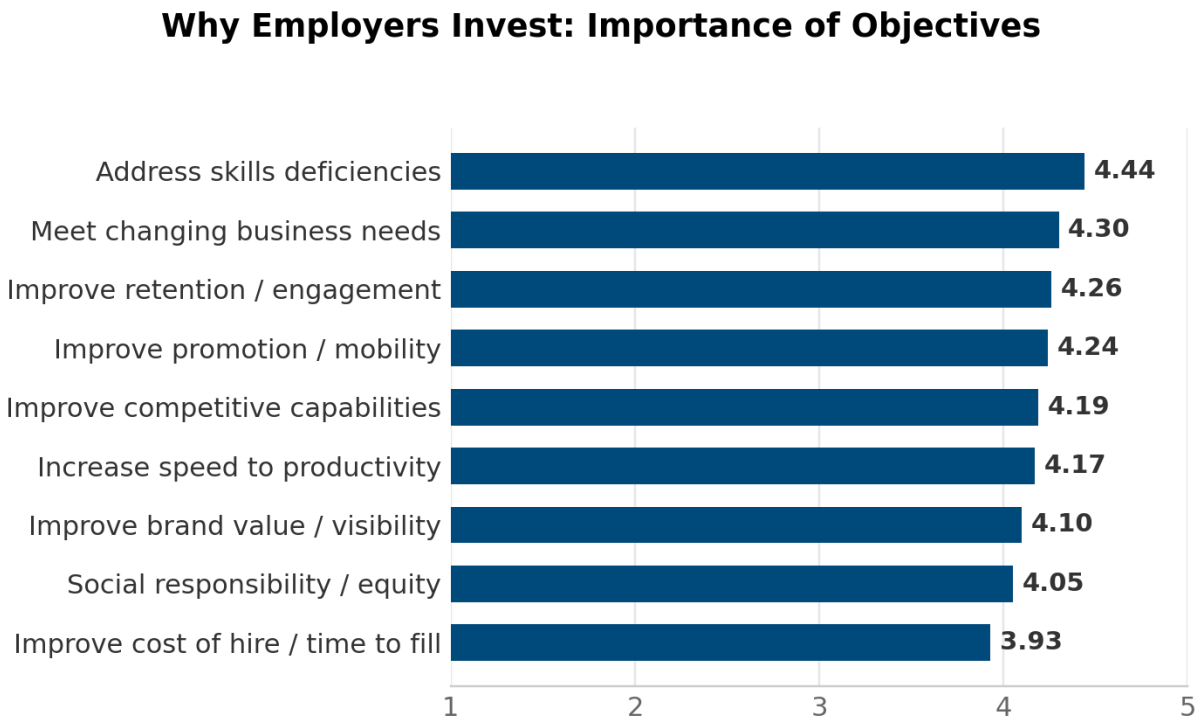


Figure 2. Mean importance of each investment objective, out of 5.

This is worth highlighting against other findings in this survey series. Foundational skills training is the program employers program for when they've identified a specific deficiency and need to close it. Foundational skills occupy a different place in employers' skills strategies than other models that is no less strategic, but likely more reactive than other forms of upskilling we've studied.

What Differentiates Successful Programs

We compared employers who rated their foundational skills programs a "5 out of 5" ("top") against everyone else ("other"), specifically looking at what separates the two groups on what is taught, how it is delivered, and what employers are trying to accomplish. As a self-reported measure of success, we see employers who rate their programs as very successful tend to rate everything higher. To identify the actual differentiators of these programs, we focused on the gaps that stand out rather than treating every positive gap as a finding.

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Back to the Basics

The clearest, and perhaps most counterintuitive finding, is in the provision of literacy and numeracy training. Numeracy training shows the largest gap between successful programs and the others of any skill: 56% of top-rated programs teach numeracy, compared with 36% of other programs, a nearly 20-point gap. Literacy follows with a meaningful, though smaller, gap (about 12 points). Digital literacy, by contract, shows no differentiation at all. We don't exactly know why this is, but we can offer a few theories. First, basic academic skills may open more doors for employees and employers than other skills. Gaining core academic skills can enable people to do more with greater clarity. Second, while we see no evidence that digital literacy training is ubiquitous among working adults in the U.S., it may be that programs teaching these skills have been offered long enough or become so commonplace that they just don't create unique value relative to other programs.

Delivery Matters

Top-rated programs lean toward local intermediaries, community colleges, and adult education providers more than other programs to support program delivery (44% vs. 36%), while lower-rated programs lean somewhat more toward national intermediary partners (43% of other programs vs. 34% of top programs). These numbers suggest that proximity and local relationships, not just the existence of a partnership, may shape how well a foundational skills program works. Internal delivery is the most common format overall (75%) and is slightly more common among top-rated programs (+8 points), reinforcing that at their core, foundational skills programs are where employers are addressing their specific skill needs.

Where Foundational Skills Show Up

Foundational skills often show up as a component of other upskilling programs, such as tuition assistance, apprenticeship, and internal development models. The apprenticeship model includes these skills most frequently, with 52.3% of apprenticeship programs in our sample teaching foundational skills alongside their core occupational training. Tuition assistance follows at 45.3%, with internal training and development last at 42.9%.

Employers who include foundational skills content in their programs consistently rate these programs as more successful. Employers who include foundational skills in their tuition assistance programs are meaningfully more likely to rate a program as very successful: 34.5% compared to 19.7% of employers who do not include these skills. Apprenticeships are even more differentiated, with 44.1% of top programs including foundational skills compared to 24.2% of other programs. We see a smaller gap for internal training and development. Of the programs in that category, 39.2% of top-rated programs include foundational skills, compared to 30.7% of lower-rated programs.

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We can't say from this data that adding foundational skills to an upskilling program will cause it to succeed, or whether employers who are already running resourced, thoughtful programs are just more likely to include foundational skills in their programming. However, the data are encouraging: foundational skills are a marker of program strength wherever they show up.

Insights and Conclusion

The Room for Growth survey provides a broad, quantitative picture of foundational skills training: who offers it, what it covers, and what differentiates successful programs. Our companion brief released earlier this year, Foundational Skills: Early Insights from Employers and Providers, offers a close, qualitative look at how a small number of employers and providers think about this work. These findings point to several important lessons:

- Foundational skills lift the programs they're embedded in. Employers who build foundational skills into tuition assistance, apprenticeship, and internal training and development are more likely to rate those programs highly than employers who leave them out. Foundational skills coverage looks less like a "nice-to-have" and more like a marker, or even a driver, of program strength.
- Language learning does not show up as frequently in our survey as it did in our interviews with employers. While still positively associated with program success (+7.2 points for tuition assistance), within foundational skills programs themselves, we did not see the same differentiating impact from language programs. This doesn't mean that language isn't a powerful model. This is likely the result of feedback from a broad swath of employers, many of whom may not need language development for their employees, unlike the targeted group we interviewed. It is possible language learning is a strong, high ROI model specifically where it's needed, without being a strong differentiator of success across a broad, mixed sample. We'll continue to explore this question in future research.
- Numeracy is the largest differentiator for success in foundational skills programs. Top-rated programs score nearly 20 points higher than other programs, a gap of more than 1.5 times that of the next largest skill, literacy. If we dig further, we see no differences between the size of employers who are focusing on numeracy, and very small differences between growing, stable, and contracting companies. We discussed differences across industries above, and see patterns of provision where frontline jobs require more math (retail) and less (hospitality). This underscores a finding from our interviews that foundational skills training works best when it's built around a concrete, identifiable need. Numeracy, followed by literacy, are where that pattern shows up the most in the data.

It's important to note here, too, that numeracy and literacy's positions as top differentiators isn't a popularity factor. Critical thinking is the most commonly taught foundational skills by a

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wide margin (77%), yet it's only a modest differentiator of success (7.5-point gap). Digital literacy, taught by half of the foundational skills programs, shows no differentiation at all. Numeracy and literacy don't differentiate programs simply because they're common. Employers who prioritize them appear to be solving specific problems. Over the next several months, we'll explore several new areas:

- Our survey data shows a strong connection between local intermediary partnerships and program success. We want to understand what drives those partnerships, how those programs work, and what we can learn about best practices for setting up both employers and providers for mutual success in delivering foundational skills, creating real benefits for the workers who need them.
- Numeracy's outsized association with successful programs is a clear finding from this report, and we don't fully understand what drives that result. Is it harder to deliver well, so doing it at all signals a more serious program? Does visible progress in math skills build confidence in a program in a way that other skills don't? Does adding numeracy skills to an employee's portfolio fundamentally change what they can do and how well?
- Our interviews, general expertise, and survey findings suggest that programs that are tailored and need-specific are generally more successful than other, more generic programs. Unfortunately, this is not the chosen direction of many organizations, given limitations in staff and resourcing. In the next stage of foundational skills research, we'll uncover the motivations behind tailored approaches, and what it takes to develop and deploy these programs.

We hope this analysis answered some questions, and we expect that it raised many others. Look for more research on the topic of how employers develop foundational skills in the coming months. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your thoughts and questions, and learn more about your own work in building foundational skills.

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