Enterprise L&D in 2026
Trends and Predictions

together
from absorb

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Introduction

Our workplaces are undergoing a seismic shift—one driven largely by rapid advances in AI and automation. These tools promise to boost productivity, streamline workflows, and remove much of the drudgery from day-to-day tasks. But they also raise a critical question: **are organizations—and their people—ready to take full advantage of them?**

For HR and L&D professionals, this moment represents both a challenge and an opportunity. As AI transforms roles and reshapes expectations, organizations must evolve just as quickly. That evolution won't come from technology alone. It hinges on people: their skills, their adaptability, their leadership capabilities, and the strength of the relationships that support them.

That's why Together created this report. Our goal is to help you understand not just what's changing, **but what those changes demand of your workforce**. Using new survey data, we explore where organizations are investing, where they feel unprepared, and which human capabilities matter most in an AI-enabled workplace.

Across this report, you'll find a clear story:

- AI is accelerating change.
- To unlock its potential, organizations must invest in people.
- Training, leadership development, and organizational knowledge are becoming more important—not less.
- And mentorship and social learning play a critical role in helping employees navigate that change with confidence.

Inside, we'll examine 2026's top L&D priorities, emerging skill gaps, AI readiness, and the rising urgency of people-centric learning. Our hope is to give you clarity—and a path forward—as you prepare your workforce for the future of work.
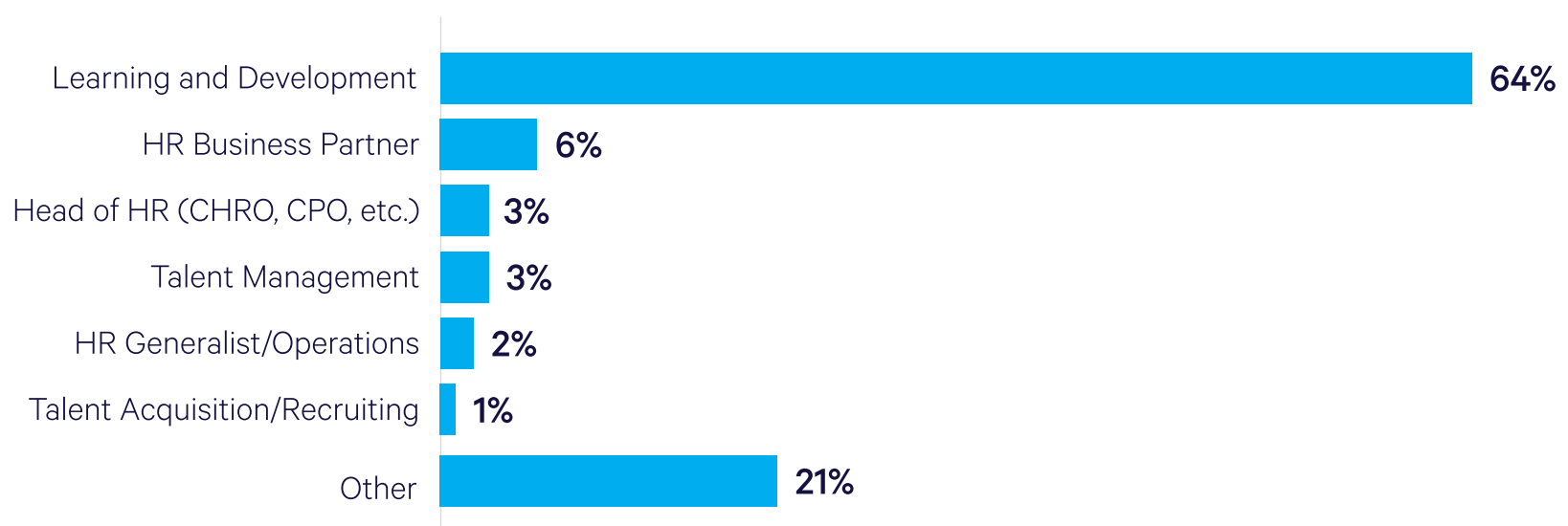
Methodology

For this report, we gathered research from both primary and secondary sources to inform and corroborate our insights and recommendations.
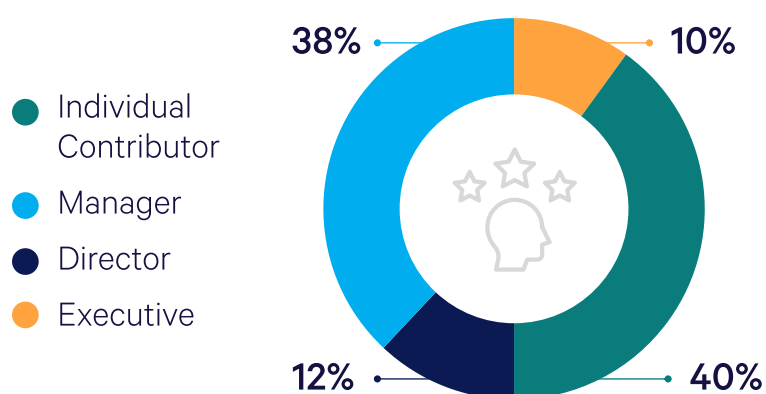
Our information comes from:

- A survey of 100 HR and L&D respondents containing 12 questions (3 demographic, 9 informational)
- Secondary sources such as LinkedIn, Gallup, McKinsey, and other respected sources
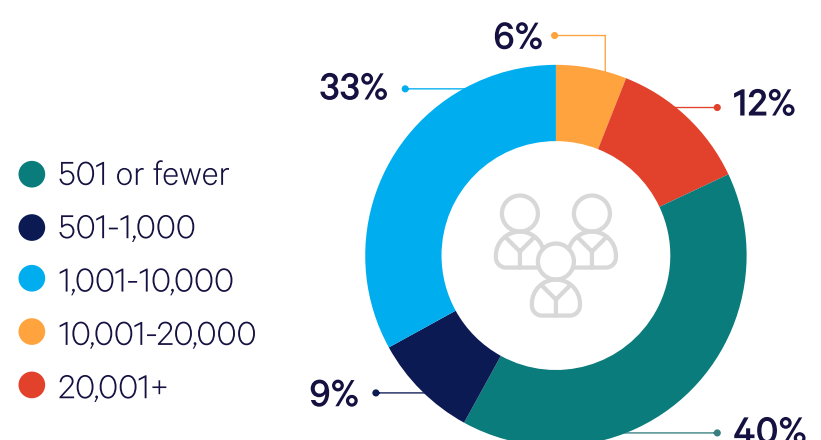
Survey participants

What best describes your primary job title/function?

Learning and Development	64%
HR Business Partner	6%
Head of HR (CHRO, CPO, etc.)	3%
Talent Management	3%
HR Generalist/Operations	2%
Talent Acquisition/Recruiting	1%
Other	21%

What is your seniority level?

- Individual Contributor — 40%
- Manager — 38%
- Director — 12%
- Executive — 10%

How many employees work at your organization?

- 501 or fewer — 40%
- 501-1,000 — 9%
- 1,001-10,000 — 33%
- 10,001-20,000 — 6%
- 20,001+ — 12%

Executive Summary

AI and automation are reshaping how work gets done—accelerating productivity, streamlining processes, and transforming roles across every industry. But as organizations adopt new technologies, one reality becomes clear: the full promise of AI can only be realized when people have the skills, support, and leadership required to use it effectively.

Our survey of L&D and HR professionals highlights this urgent need for people enablement. HR and L&D leaders are prioritizing the skills and structures that enable employees to navigate technological change with confidence. Yet significant capability gaps remain, underscoring the importance of investing not only in new tools but also in the people who use them.

Leadership development remains the top priority

For the second consecutive year, leadership skills top the list of L&D priorities. Organizations recognize that in an era of change, leaders must guide teams through uncertainty, coach effectively, and support innovation—yet many still lack the competencies required. 61% of respondents expect leadership development to be their primary focus in 2026.

Human-centric skills are in highest demand

Despite rapid advances in AI, the skills employees need most are uniquely human.

56% Cite strategic and critical thinking as a top skill need.	**44%** Cite digital fluency, reflecting the need to work alongside new technologies.	**42%** Identify leadership skills as essential for navigating organizational change.

These findings reinforce a central theme: AI elevates the need for human judgment, adaptability, and connection—not the opposite.

AI adoption is rising, but readiness lags

61% of organizations have fully or partially adopted AI into their L&D strategies, or are currently testing it. However, readiness varies widely. Many lack clear implementation plans, sufficient AI literacy, or the infrastructure needed to support effective usage. Without the right skills and cultural alignment, modernization efforts risk stalling.

Social learning and mentorship are critical, but driving impact is a challenge

Although 77% of HR and L&D leaders believe formal mentorship will be critical for development in 2026, nearly a quarter say their organizations are not leveraging social learning effectively. Mentorship provides what AI cannot:

- Human guidance to navigate change
- Context-rich knowledge transfer
- Support for leadership development
- Coaching that enhances critical thinking and decision-making

As organizations modernize their learning ecosystems, these human-centered practices become the connective tissue between technological adoption and workforce readiness.

The path forward
Combine modern learning technology with human connection

Our data paints a clear picture: **technology alone will not prepare organizations for the future of work.**

To fully realize the benefits of AI and automation, companies must invest in people—building leadership strength, developing future-ready skills, and creating space for human learning experiences that drive behavioral change.

Mentorship and social learning emerge as the strategic bridge between innovation and capability, ensuring employees have the support, confidence, and knowledge required to thrive in an AI-enabled workplace.

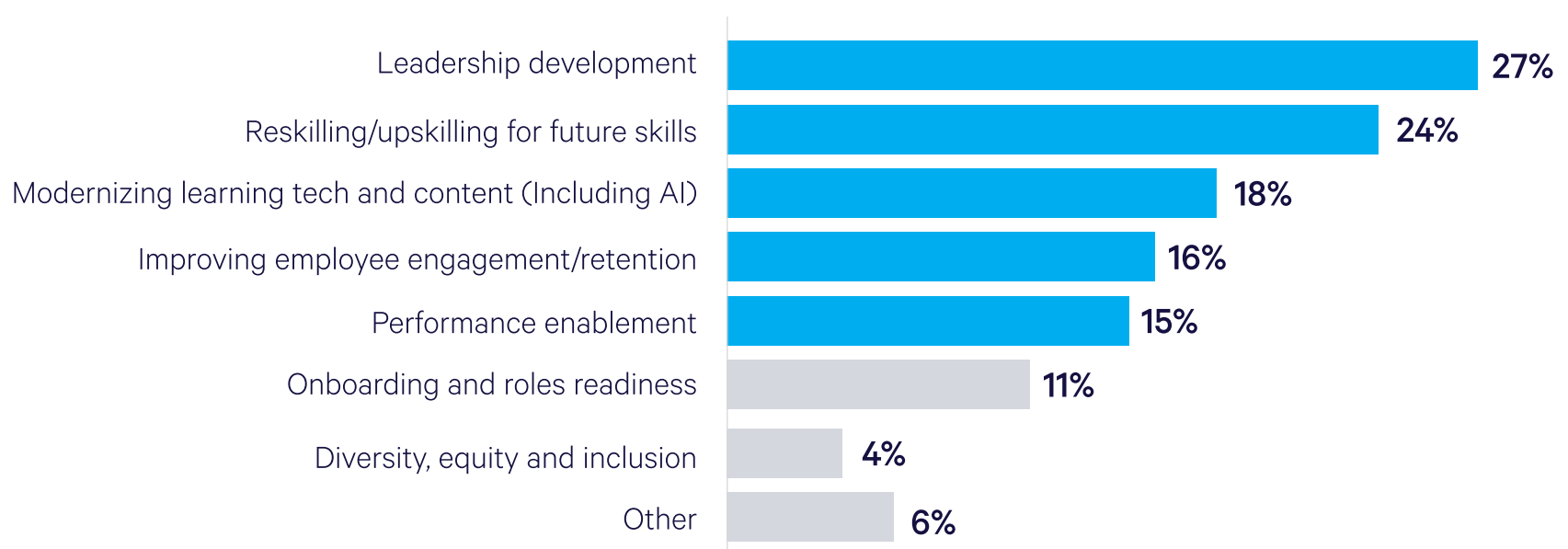from absorb

Part 1
2026 Top Priorities

AI and automation are accelerating the pace of change across organizations, reshaping roles and redefining expectations for employees and leaders alike. As companies work to adapt, L&D teams are under growing pressure to build the human capabilities required to make these technological shifts successful.

This year's top priorities reflect that urgency. Leadership development, future-focused skills, and modernization efforts all point to a single, overarching need: **organizations must strengthen their people in order to fully realize the benefits of emerging technologies.**

In this section, we examine where HR and L&D leaders are focusing their efforts for 2026—and how these priorities serve as the foundation for AI-enabled transformation.

In our survey to HR and Learning & Development professionals, we asked each respondent to select their top three priorities. By far the most selected option was leadership development (61% of respondents or 27% of total responses), which is relatively on par with last year's results where leadership development made up 26% of total responses.

Top L&D priorities in 2026 (Total responses)

Priority	Percentage
Leadership development	27%
Reskilling/upskilling for future skills	24%
Modernizing learning tech and content (Including AI)	18%
Improving employee engagement/retention	16%
Performance enablement	15%
Onboarding and roles readiness	11%
Diversity, equity and inclusion	4%
Other	6%

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Leadership development

Leadership development is a prime example of a long-term and ongoing strategy. Whether the aim is to prepare new leaders or build on skills in the current leadership team, leadership development is crucial to ensuring your leaders are ready to take on challenges and guide their teams through change with confidence. Studies suggest there's some catch-up required for many organizations, hence why this continues to be the top priority over two years.[1]

Leadership affects every single aspect of your company so it absolutely should be top priority. However, be mindful of how you approach development. We'll explore this more deeply in section three, but keep in mind static training or one-off classroom sessions aren't the most effective route to ensuring long-term retention and practical application of skills.

Upskilling and reskilling

As the second top priority two years running, the importance of ongoing upskilling and reskilling cannot be understated. With skill needs changing so quickly, gaps are widening. One challenge many organizations face is figuring out what those gaps are in the first place. After all, you can't address a skill gap if you don't know where it is.

This priority closely ties in with third on our list: modernization. Committing to long-term upskilling and reskilling initiatives is a critical part of becoming or continuing to be agile and adaptable at the company level, but also the individual level.

49% of Learning & Development professionals say their executive leadership team is concerned employees don't have the skills to execute their business strategy[2]

49%

Learning tech and content modernization

If you're like most organizations, you have a backlog of training resources that have been in circulation for years or maybe an LMS that has been neglected for too long. Updating and modernization is on many HR and L&D professionals' minds since this is the third highest priority this year.

Whether you're looking to completely overhaul how you deliver training and employee development initiatives or implement new technology (including AI), the phrase to keep in mind here is **change management**. Nothing kills a modernization initiative like rushing implementation. In section two, we'll take a deeper look into what modernization looks like and how to assess readiness in your organization.

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[1] Center for Creative Leadership, "The Leadership Gap: What You Need, And Still Don't Have, When It Comes To Leadership Talent."

[2] LinkedIn, "Workplace Learning Report 2025: The Rise of Career Champions."

Employee engagement and retention

Still among the top five priorities, employee engagement and retention remain incredibly important to HR and L&D. Engagement is a consistent or worsening challenge for most organizations, meaning they're looking for new ways to keep their employees feeling connected to their work.

> Only 31% of U.S. employees are engaged in their jobs.[3]
>
> **31%**

Engagement is directly tied to an employee's willingness to stay at a company long term—and retention is still very much a challenge. Many of the priorities on this list go a long way to addressing engagement and retention issues, including modernization and leadership.

> 51% of employees are keeping an eye out for or actively seeking a new job.[4]
>
> **51%**

Performance enablement

There is a shift happening from performance management to performance enablement.[5] HR and L&D professionals are leaning into a framework that prioritizes tools, guidance, and support for their employees rather than the traditional performance reviews and other management tactics.

Top HR and L&D priorities by organization size

# of employees	Top Priority
500 or fewer	Leadership development
501 - 1,000	Reskilling and upskilling
1,001 - 10,000	Leadership development
10,001 - 20,000	Onboarding and role readiness/Modernizing learning technology and content
20,001 or more	Reskilling and upskilling

These priorities reveal a clear direction: technology and people development must move in tandem. As AI becomes more integrated into daily work, organizations need clarity on whether their teams—and their learning ecosystems—are prepared for this shift. That brings us to Part 2: **AI readiness.**

[3] Gallup, "Employee Engagement."
[4] Gallup, "Employee Retention & Attraction."
[5] Lighthouse Research & Advisory, "Performance Management is Out: Performance Enablement is In."

AI Readiness

Gallup reports that 19% of U.S. employees use AI at work once a week or more—a rate nearly doubled since 2023.[6] The reality is: AI is here and it's now a part of many aspects of our lives—including our workplaces.

Over a third of survey respondents say they have not yet adopted AI into their L&D programs, while another third say they're in the process of testing the waters.

To what extent has your organization adopted AI tools into your L&D programs?

- Not yet integrated
- No plans to integrate
- Don't know/not applicable
- Fully integrated
- Partially integrated
- Piloting or testing

5% 3% 6% 23% 32% 31%
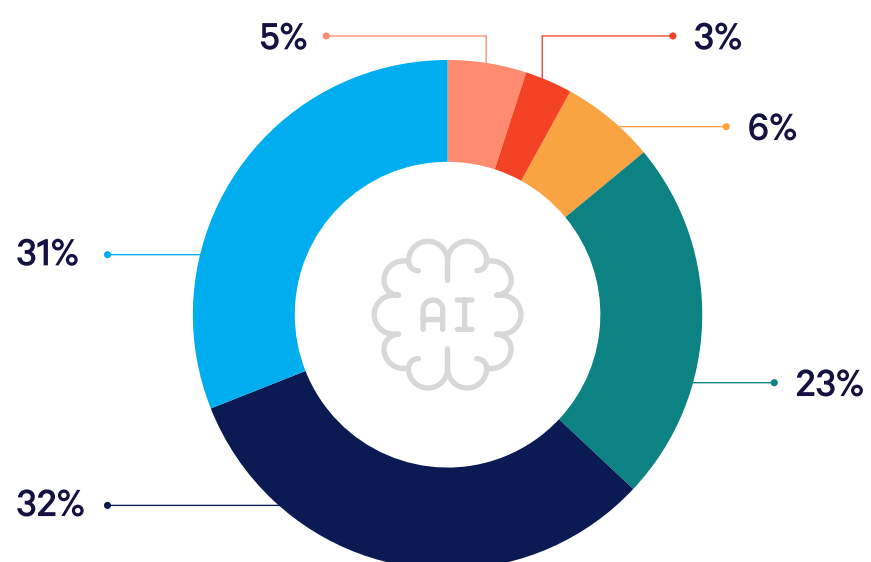
While 32% are in the piloting or testing phase, another 31% say they have not yet integrated AI. There are still quite a few barriers for many organizations when it comes to adopting AI into their daily work, let alone Learning & Development. Stakeholder resistance, uneven employee adoption, and a lack of ethical guidelines for use in hiring, learning, and performance management, all can stop AI implementation in its tracks.

If you're firmly in the "not yet adopted" camp, there's a lot to consider before diving into AI implementation. AI offers many benefits to your Learning & Development initiatives, but if implementation is rushed, not thoroughly planned and considered, or proper buy-in isn't secured, you could be introducing a lot of risk to your organization.

Much of that risk is for your IT team to consider and prepare for. So, what we'll talk about in this section is how to determine your function's AI readiness, potential risks, as well as how to approach buy-in and training for all stakeholders.

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[6] Gallup, "AI Use at Work Has Nearly Doubled in Two Years."

Assessing AI readiness in L&D

Jumping into an AI implementation without thorough planning is kind of like assembling furniture without the instructions—messy, frustrating, and unlikely to produce the desired result.

Only 22% of employees say their organization has communicated a clear plan or strategy for integrating AI.[7]

22%

AI is a powerful tool with many potential benefits, but before you can see those benefits you need to know if you, your team, your employees, and your entire organization are actually ready to adopt and use it.

4 key considerations to determine AI readiness in L&D:

01	02	03	04
L&D's AI/tech skill gaps	Infrastructure and resource availability	Cultural sentiment and readiness	AI literacy in L&D and broader organization

Conduct a skills gap analysis of your team

First things first: look inward. Your team is going to be the driving force behind this initiative and need the skills and expertise to back it up. A skills gap analysis will help you understand what your team knows and where they need to grow. Identifying any gaps early on allows you and your team to build development plans for yourselves and become the expertise behind the initiative.

Ask yourselves

- Do we understand the basics of AI and machine learning? (e.g. how it works, how it sources information, understanding potential biases and inaccuracies, etc.)
- Can we analyze data to make informed decisions about learning content?
- Do we know our company's security policies when it comes to AI and how to request approval for new systems?
- Do we know how to evaluate AI vendors and their tools?

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[7] Gallup, "AI Use at Work Has Nearly Doubled in Two Years."

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Build on AI literacy for L&D professionals first

You and your team don't need to become data scientists overnight, but a foundational level of AI literacy is required. This means understanding the core concepts, possibilities, and limitations of AI in the context of learning.

Make sure you and your team understand:

What AI can and cannot do
Differentiating between AI hype and practical applications in L&D.

Ethical considerations
Recognizing biases in AI algorithms and understanding data privacy implications.

Key terminology
Knowing the difference between machine learning, natural language processing, and generative AI.

Audit your infrastructure and resources

Dreams of large-scale AI-powered L&D programs are great, but you need the right infrastructure and resources to support it long term.

Data: Do you have access to relevant learner data?
(e.g. demographic data, role/experience data, skill needs, learning preferences, assessment results, etc.)

Technology: Do any of your current L&D systems support AI integrations?
Would you need to upgrade or switch vendors?

Budget: Have you allocated funds not just for any new tools but also for training, implementation, and maintenance?

People: Do you have people on your team with the right skills and willingness to manage and champion this initiative?

Assess cultural readiness and AI sentiments

An organization's culture can make or break any new initiative, especially one as large as AI. In many ways, AI can be a polarizing topic which is why it's so important to do a pulse check of your company's attitude towards change and technology.
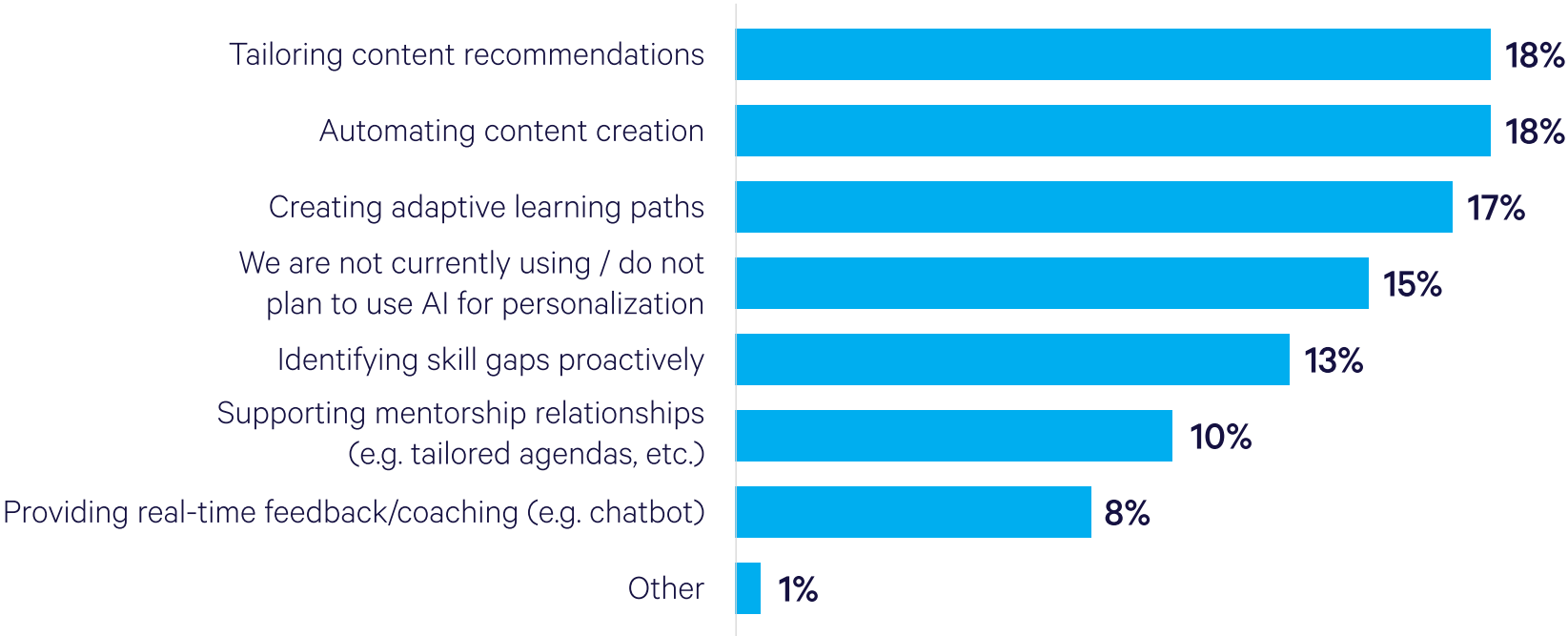
Consider these questions

- How open is your leadership team to AI and tech innovation and how willing are they to invest in new learning technologies?
- How have employees reacted to new systems and processes in the past?
- How do employees feel about AI? (e.g. fear they'll be replaced by AI, excited about its potential, etc.)

# How HR and L&D currently or are planning to use AI

While many teams are still in the exploratory stages of AI adoption, the organizations who have implemented it or are planning to are using it in interesting ways.

How is your L&D team currently using or planning to use AI to personalize learning experiences?

Category	Percentage
Tailoring content recommendations	18%
Automating content creation	18%
Creating adaptive learning paths	17%
We are not currently using / do not plan to use AI for personalization	15%
Identifying skill gaps proactively	13%
Supporting mentorship relationships (e.g. tailored agendas, etc.)	10%
Providing real-time feedback/coaching (e.g. chatbot)	8%
Other	1%

Once your team has the basics of AI adoption down, take a page from your peers' books and see other ways you can use AI in your L&D strategy.

Top ways AI is used or planning to be used in L&D
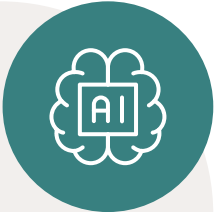
1. Tailoring content recommendations: AI can analyze employee data and suggest personalized learning content that fits their skill gaps and career goals.

2. Automating content creation: AI tools can help streamline the creation of training materials.

3. Creating adaptive learning paths: AI can develop dynamic learning experiences that adjust based on employee performance and engagement.

Even with the right tools and readiness, AI cannot close skill gaps on its own. To thrive in a tech-enabled workplace, employees need a strong foundation of human skills—judgment, adaptability, critical thinking, leadership—that AI can support but never replace. Part 3 dives into the **skill development** employees will need most in the years ahead.

Skill Development

As organizations adopt AI and modernize their operations, the skills employees need are shifting just as quickly. Our data shows that the most in-demand capabilities for 2026 are overwhelmingly human-centered—strategic thinking, leadership, adaptability, and digital fluency.

These capabilities are essential for employees to make informed decisions, collaborate effectively, and work confidently alongside evolving technologies. Yet many organizations remain uncertain about whether their current L&D strategies are positioned to close these gaps.

In this section, we explore the skills employees will need most, why these capabilities matter, and how organizations can build a future-ready workforce grounded in both technological and human capability.

Our survey results showed only 11% of HR and L&D professionals are extremely confident in their future skills-building strategy while 44% are feeling somewhat confident. To us, that 44% sounds more like cautious optimism in a time when things are changing faster than L&D can keep up.

Rate how confident you are in your organization's L&D strategy in preparing your workforce for future skill needs

- Somewhat not confident
- Extremely not confident
- Don't know / not applicable
- Extremely confident
- Somewhat confident
- Neutral

13% 4% 2% 11% 26% 44%
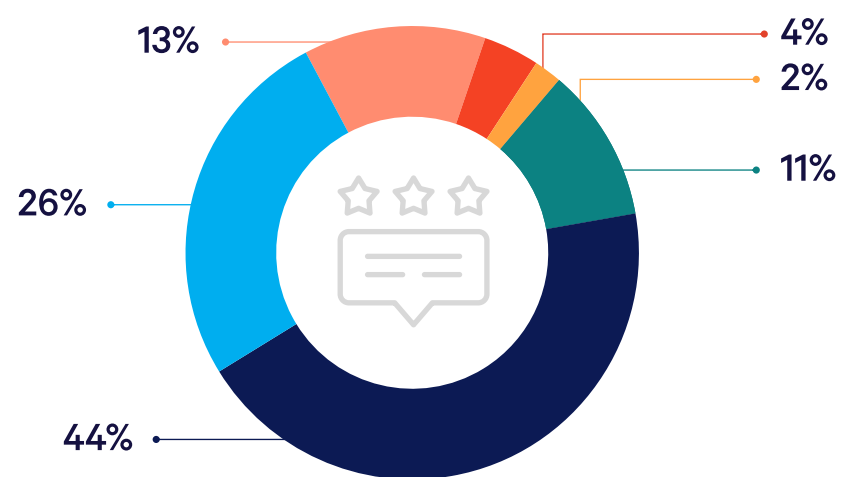
However, when it comes to skill gaps, many experts in this space are sounding the alarm. Employers told the World Economic Forum that they expect 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030.[8] In 2023, LinkedIn's COO discussed the concerning skills gap trend with the Society for Human Resource Management.[9]

> "The long-term trend is undeniable that the demand for skills outpaces the supply of skills."
>
> - Dan Shapero, Chief Operating Officer, LinkedIn

With these warnings in mind, let's dive deeper into which skills employees are going to need the most in the coming year and beyond and why it's so critical to close these gaps.

[8] World Economic Forum, "The Future of Jobs Report 2025."
[9] Society for Human Resource Management, "The Skills Gap is So Big That Nearly Half of Workers Need to Be Retrained This Decade."

Top predicted skill needs for 2026

To build your future-ready workforce, you'll first need to understand what skills your employees are going to need. In our survey, respondents chose the top three predicted skills their employees will need for the year ahead. We found that there is a large focus on human-centric skills over technical acumen.

Top 3 most predicted skill needs

56%
Say strategic and critical thinking (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving, systems thinking)
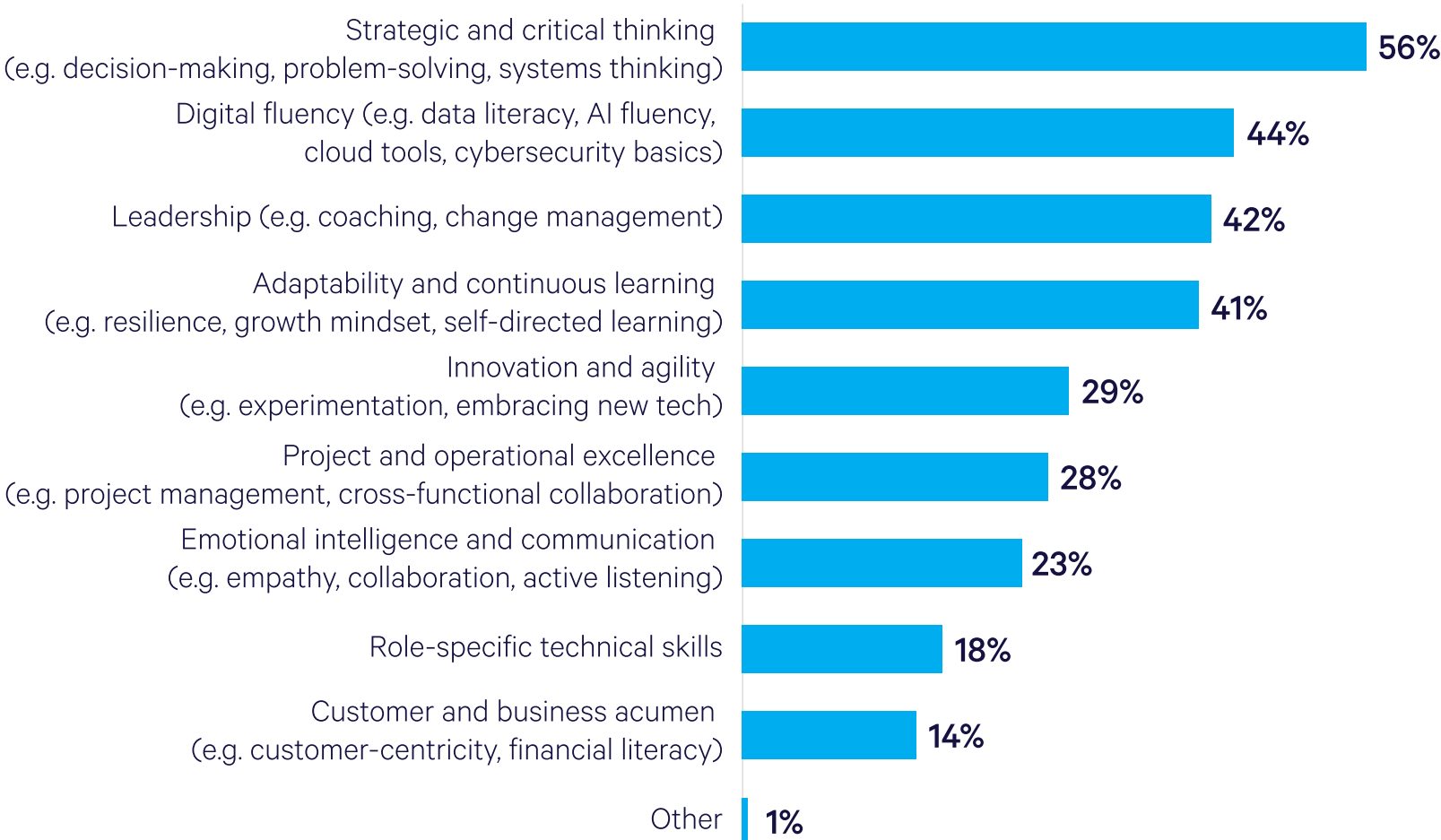
44%
Say digital fluency (e.g. data literacy, AI fluency, cloud tools, cybersecurity basics)

42%
Say leadership skills (e.g. coaching, change management)

These results tell a compelling story of where L&D efforts need to focus.

What skills or capabilities will be most critical for your workforce by 2026? (Select up to 3)

Skill	Percentage
Strategic and critical thinking (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving, systems thinking)	56%
Digital fluency (e.g. data literacy, AI fluency, cloud tools, cybersecurity basics)	44%
Leadership (e.g. coaching, change management)	42%
Adaptability and continuous learning (e.g. resilience, growth mindset, self-directed learning)	41%
Innovation and agility (e.g. experimentation, embracing new tech)	29%
Project and operational excellence (e.g. project management, cross-functional collaboration)	28%
Emotional intelligence and communication (e.g. empathy, collaboration, active listening)	23%
Role-specific technical skills	18%
Customer and business acumen (e.g. customer-centricity, financial literacy)	14%
Other	1%

35% of employees say they don't feel confident they have the skills to do their jobs effectively.[10]

35%

[10]CIO, "74% of workers suggest employers to blame for their AI skills gap."

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The enduring need for soft skills

In an age of automation, uniquely human skills are becoming more valuable than ever. While AI can process data, it can't replicate the nuance of human connection and judgment. That's why skills like critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and adaptability are ranking high on the list.

Strategic and critical thinking

This is the most predicted skill needed for 2026—and for very good reason. Tying back to the previous section's caution about over-reliance on tech, overuse of AI and automation is eroding critical thinking skills.[11] Employees need the ability to analyze complex situations, question assumptions, and make informed decisions more than ever.

Emotional intelligence and empathy

These skills are the foundation of any kind of collaboration, leadership, and customer relationships. Learning how to understand and manage one's own emotions and recognize them in others is a key element of a well-functioning and adaptable workforce.

Adaptability and resilience

The pace of change shows no signs of slowing. Employees and leaders who can pivot quickly, learn from setbacks, and stay resilient in the face of uncertainty are the ones who will thrive.

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[11] Phys.org, "Increased AI use linked to eroding critical thinking skills."

What technological advancement means for skill development

The second most predicted skill needed for 2026 is digital fluency, and it's a big one. The pace of change in the world demands we transform how work is done in many ways. As we discussed in the previous section, AI readiness and any technology changes require a foundational level of digital competence across your entire organization.

92% of jobs now require digital skills, but a third of employees have low or no digital skills.[12]

92%

Digital fluency isn't just for the IT department. It's the ability for every employee to comfortably use digital tools to communicate, collaborate, solve problems, learn, and perform day-to-day job tasks.

This matters within the L&D department, too. You and your team are no longer solely creating courses or facilitating classroom sessions. You need to learn to work alongside technology to build learning ecosystems that deliver personalized learning experiences at scale.

The concerning leadership skills gap

Leadership development is the highest priority for HR and L&D in 2026 and the associated skill needs are high up on the list, too. Despite these priorities topping lists for multiple years, many organizations show a concerning skill gap.

Part of the reason is the evolution of leadership itself. The older "command-and-control" styles of management are obsolete, making way for more effective and human-centric leadership. And this is no small problem. A lack of effective leadership directly impacts employee engagement, retention, and creativity—not to mention the plethora of business impacts.

A 2025 study from Gallup finds that ineffective leadership is the root of many organizational challenges.[13]

ONLY
47%
Of employees strongly agree that they know what is expected of them at work

ONLY
31%
Strongly agree that someone at work encourages their development

ONLY
32%
Feel strongly connected to their organization's mission or purpose

ONLY
28%
Strongly agree that their opinions count at work

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[12] National Skills Coalition, "New Report: 92% of Jobs Require Digital Skills, One-Third of Workers Have Low or No Digital Skills Due to Historic Underinvestment, Structural Inequities."

[13] Gallup, "Anemic Employee Engagement Points to Leadership Challenges."

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> **All of these aspects are directly tied to how leadership operates—whether it's an employee's direct manager or the organization's executive leadership team. If employees don't feel supported by their leaders, they can't perform at their best and will eventually walk out the door.**

Addressing these gaps in leadership skills starts with a true commitment to ongoing leadership development and not just one-off workshops. Invest in targeted coaching, mentorship, and identify and nurture high-potential talent before they even step into a management role.

The rise of performance enablement v.s. performance management

Perhaps one of the most interesting and encouraging shifts in skill development is the move away from traditional performance management towards performance enablement. Changing how you approach learning, growth, and performance can have a positive impact on employees and the entire organization. So, let's explore the difference.

Performance management	Performance enablement
• Backward-looking process that focuses on evaluation.	• Forward-looking process that focuses on development.
• Formal and infrequent.	• Continuous and collaborative.
• Anxiety-inducing scrutiny with "how did you do?"	• Encourages growth and asks "how can we help you succeed?"

The shift creates a much more positive and effective experience for everyone. It replaces judgment with coaching and annual ratings with ongoing feedback. This approach also gives employees more power to take ownership of their own growth, creating more engaged learners and more effective employees.

Skill development doesn't happen through technology alone. The fastest and most effective way to build these critical capabilities is through human connection and contextual learning. That leads us to Part 4, where we explore **the role of social learning and mentorship** as the human-in-the-loop mechanisms that accelerate employee growth.

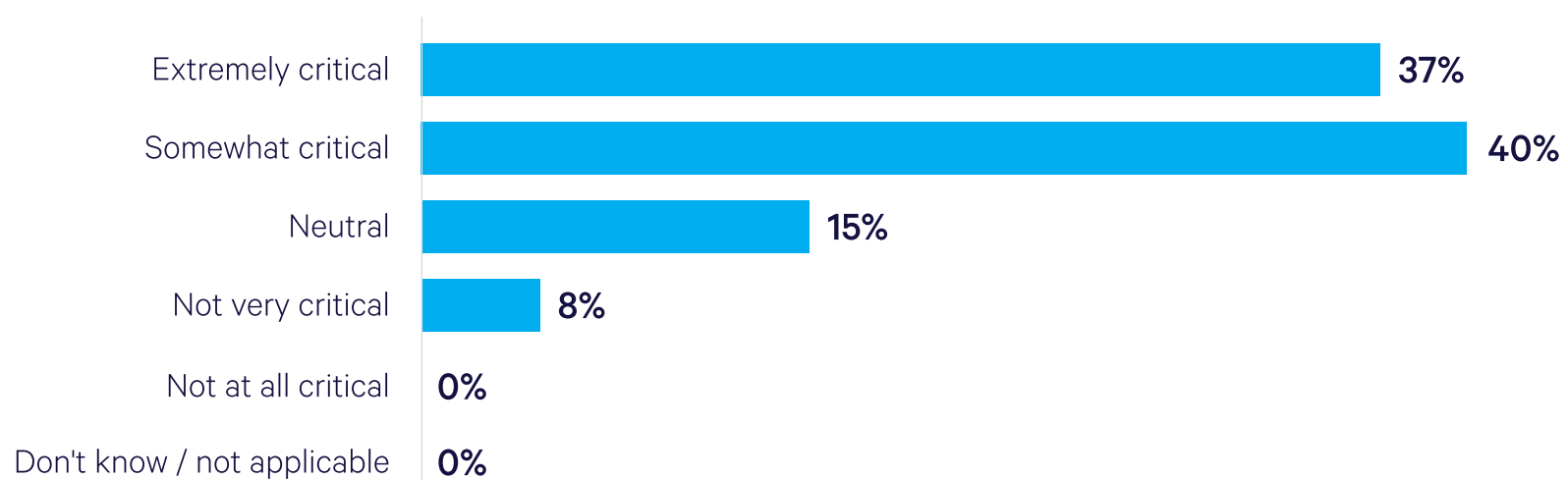[13] Gallup, "Anemic Employee Engagement Points to Leadership Challenges."

The Role of Social Learning & Mentorship

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement, it's easy to assume that digital tools will solve every development challenge. But while AI can personalize learning, recommend content, and automate workflows, it cannot replace the human experiences that truly drive growth: guidance, collaboration, shared problem-solving, and emotional support.

Our findings show that HR and L&D leaders overwhelmingly recognize the importance of these human elements—**77% believe formal mentorship will be critical by 2026**—yet many organizations still under-leverage social learning as a strategic development tool.

To what extent do you believe formal mentorship programs will be critical for skill development and career progression in your organization?

Extremely critical	37%
Somewhat critical	40%
Neutral	15%
Not very critical	8%
Not at all critical	0%
Don't know / not applicable	0%

Despite so many HR and L&D professionals believing formal mentorship programs and other social learning are important, a report from Absorb found that 43.6% of organizations say they don't use any kind of social learning (e.g. apprenticeships, coaching, mentorship, employee resource groups, etc.) and don't have any plans to—marking it as a vastly underused resource.[14] Among organizations who do use social learning as part of their L&D strategy, nearly a quarter of respondents admit their organization is leveraging it ineffectively.

The thing about social learning is it's at the heart of all learning. Whether you feel your organization is leveraging it effectively or not, understanding the core pillars, benefits, and practical applications will help you continue to support your employees' growth. In this section, we're going to explore the largest barriers to implementing focused social learning, why it should be prioritized and focused, and how you can apply it in the modern workplace.

[14] Absorb, "Inside the state of upskilling: What's working, what's not, and what's next for strategic learning and development."

People-centric learning in the age of AI and automation

Say it with feeling: technology will never replace human connection and learning. AI is a phenomenal tool for scaling and personalizing learning content. It can recommend courses, track progress, and analyze data. But, it cannot replicate the spark and value of human connection. It can't offer a word of encouragement after a tough project or share a lesson learned from a past failure with a sense of shared experience. And, in times of great change, social learning builds adaptability and resilience to help employees—and organizations as a whole—face what's ahead and thrive.[15]

Human growth is fundamentally social. We build confidence through encouragement, deepen our understanding through debate, and find inspiration in the success of others. These people-centric experiences are the heart and soul of a resilient, adaptable, and engaged workforce.

The power of social learning

Social learning is not a new concept—it's how human beings have always learned. It's the process of absorbing knowledge and skills by observing, interacting with, and learning from the people around us. It's happening constantly, whether you have a formal program for it or not.

However, just because it happens organically doesn't mean that you don't need some infrastructure behind it. The key is to focus that energy into desired outcomes such as closing a skill gap or nurturing future leaders.

What is social learning?

At its core, social learning is learning in context. It's the junior developer watching a senior developer debug code or the sales team sharing successful pitch strategies or a cross-functional team brainstorming a solution to a complex problem. This is not rigid learning, but powerful, organic moments of knowledge transfer.

[15] McKinsey & Company, "Developing a resilient, adaptable workforce for an uncertain future."

from absorb

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory

In 1977, psychologist Albert Bandura presented the theory of social learning to the world.[16] It suggests that individuals can develop new behaviors not solely through direct experience but also by watching others and seeing the consequences of their actions. Bandura's theory calls out four processes of social learning:

Attention
You observe those around you and how they behave—Bandura calls these "models".

Retention
The learned behavior is stored in your memory.

Reproduction
You imitate the model's behavior.

Motivation
You see the positive or negative responses to it and decide whether to adopt that behavior.

Why is it so effective?

Social learning works because it's relevant, timely, and builds on trust. When an employee gets advice from a respected peer, the information sticks. It provides not just the "what" but the "how" and "why" within the nuances of your organization—something you won't always get from an online training module.

Let's take a look at why it's so effective:

- Encourages real-time knowledge sharing and collaboration.
- Builds trust through-peer-to-peer interactions and mentoring.
- Provides contextual learning tailored to the organization's specific challenges and goals.
- Fosters a sense of community and psychological safety.
- Strengthens knowledge retention through practical, relatable examples.
- Reduces skill gaps by leveraging the diverse expertise within your team.
- Encourages adaptability by exposing employees to diverse perspectives and approaches.
- Enhances problem-solving through collective brainstorming and shared ideas.

Remember section three where we talked about skill needs? The most effective way to develop those most crucial skills such as critical and strategic thinking and leadership competencies is by focusing that social learning energy.

91% of teams develop new skills more effectively together.[17]

91%
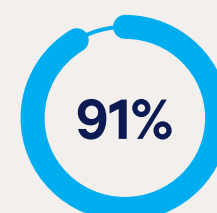
[16] Simply Psychology, "Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory."
[17] CIPD, "How L&D can create value: Focus on social collaborative learning."

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Mentorship as a strategic skill development tool

While social learning happens organically, that doesn't mean it can't be structured and focused to reach your desired outcomes. Formalizing mentorship transforms it from a matter of chance into a powerful tool for targeted skill development and cultural improvement.

Here are a few examples of practical applications of a formal mentorship program to close skill gaps:

Leadership development

Pair potential or new leaders with experienced managers to cultivate decision-making and team management skills. New leaders can learn through observation of how experienced leaders manage their teams.

Critical and strategic thinking

Mentors can guide mentees through complex problem-solving processes directly related to their current challenges, making it highly relevant and more likely to stick.

Adaptability and resilience

Insights from more seasoned professionals helps mentees develop confidence and understanding that will help them weather change.

Build a business case for mentorship

So, why should companies care about mentorship? From the examples above, we know it's beneficial on an individual level but the benefits become a ripple throughout the whole organization. Here are a few quick stats for you to consider:

01 Those who participate in mentorship programs are more likely to stay **(mentors: 69%, mentees: 72%)** than those who don't participate[18]

02 Mentorship programs also improve retention rates for women and minorities **(between 15% - 38% improvement)**[19]

03 Employees who participate in mentorship programs are twice as likely to be engaged and satisfied at work than those who don't participate[20]

04 Employees who are happy and satisfied at work are 12% more productive on average[21]

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[18] Knowledge at Wharton, "Workplace Loyalties Change, but the Value of Mentoring Doesn't."

[19] Forbes, "Improve Workplace Culture With A Strong Mentoring Program."

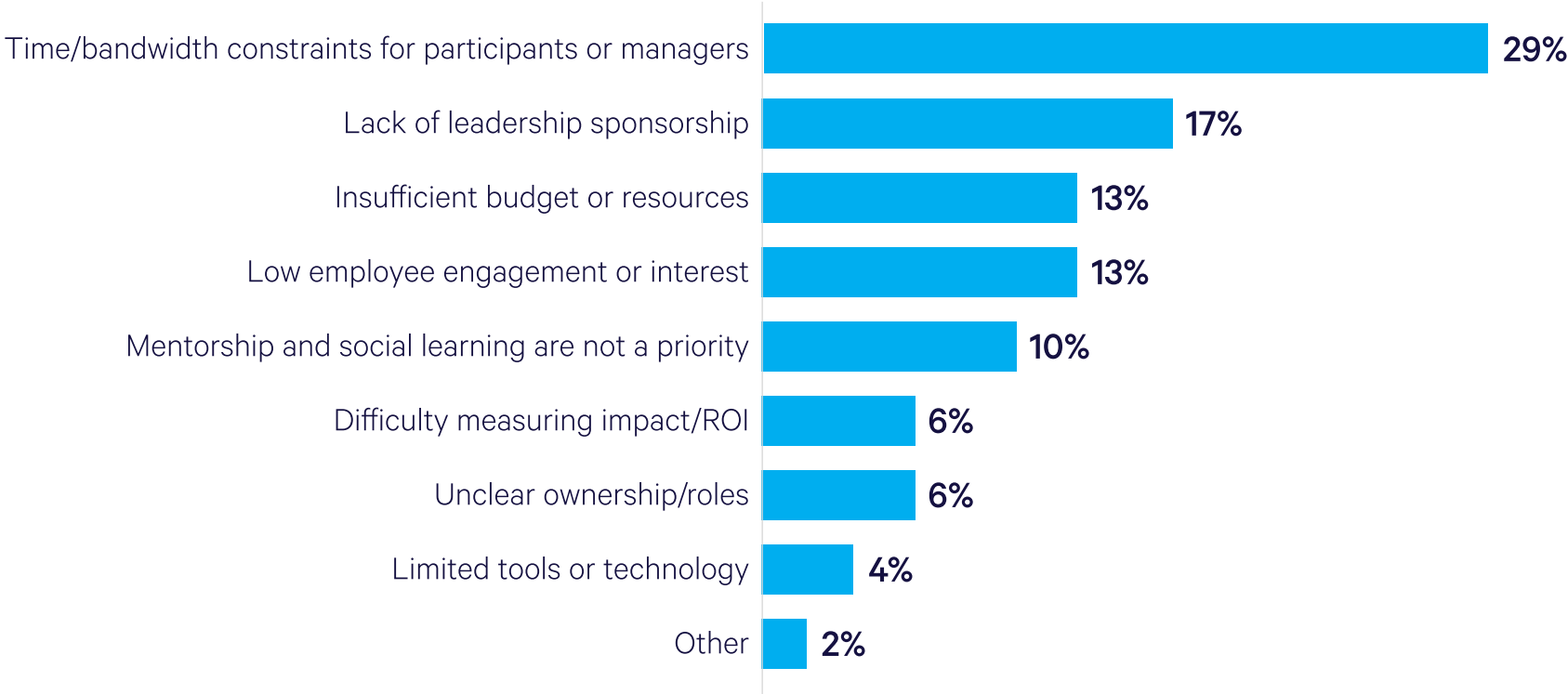[20] Gallup, "Mentors and Sponsors Make the Difference."

[21] The University of Warwick, "Happiness and Productivity."

# Barriers to effective social learning implementation

Now we understand the power potential of focused social learning programs, so why aren't more companies implementing more effective programs? Respondents say that employee capacity is by far the largest barrier to seeing success from structured social learning programs.

What is the largest barrier to implementing more effective social learning and mentorship initiatives in your organization?

Barrier	%
Time/bandwidth constraints for participants or managers	29%
Lack of leadership sponsorship	17%
Insufficient budget or resources	13%
Low employee engagement or interest	13%
Mentorship and social learning are not a priority	10%
Difficulty measuring impact/ROI	6%
Unclear ownership/roles	6%
Limited tools or technology	4%
Other	2%

Earlier this year, Gallup found the same: a lack of time is the biggest hurdle for Learning & Development at work.[22] 41% of employees said they can't dedicate time to learning at work and 37% of managers say they don't have the time to properly support their team's development.

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41%   **37%**
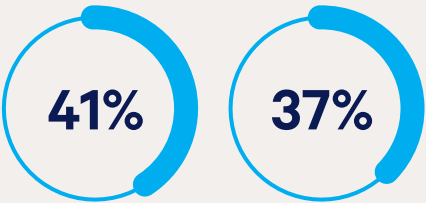
[22] Gallup, "Addressing the Barriers Blocking Employee Development."

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It's not just an organizational issue

To be clear, we're not suggesting this is an organizational failure—it's far larger than that. In last year's report, we talked at length about the rising prevalence of overwork and burnout and that trend shows no signs of slowing down.

In the 2025 Work in America survey by the American Psychological Association, they found:

44% of employees are worried about losing their jobs due to economic downturn and/or government policy changes

Workers under 44 years old were mostly likely to cite job insecurity as a significant stressor at work

54% of employees feel like they don't matter to their employer[23]

In addition to this study, the Society for Human Resources Management's 2024 State of Employee Mental Health report found:

44% of employees feel burned out from their work	30% often feel stressed about work	22% often feel anxious[24]

Social learning can help ease workplace stress

Social learning isn't just for skill development and knowledge-sharing. Strong interpersonal connections at work have significant stress-relieving effects. When employees can come together in shared experiences and build supportive relationships, it helps with solving those stress-inducing problems while building psychological safety and improving how our bodies fundamentally respond to stress.[25]

While it's in no way a cure-all, prioritizing and facilitating social learning opportunities is in every organization's best interest for reducing stress and building resilience.

[23] American Psychological Association, "Majority of U.S. workers say job insecurity has significant impact on their stress."
[24] Society for Human Resource Management, "Here's How Bad Burnout Has Become at Work."
[25]Psychology Today, "Social Relationships Affect How Your Body Responds to Stress."

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Conclusion

As organizations prepare for the future of work, one message rings clear: **technology and human connection must advance together.**

Preparing for the future of work requires more than updating technology. It requires strengthening the human capabilities that allow organizations to use that technology well. Leadership, critical thinking, adaptability, digital fluency, and organizational knowledge have never been more essential—and the growing gaps in these areas show that incremental adjustments to L&D strategies are no longer enough.

As our survey findings make clear, HR and L&D teams are navigating both opportunity and pressure. AI offers tremendous potential to enhance learning, personalize development, and streamline work. But its impact depends entirely on whether employees feel confident, supported, and capable of working alongside new tools. That means organizations must invest just as intentionally in people as they do in technology.

Central to that investment is human connection. Mentorship and social learning provide the context, coaching, and emotional support employees need to translate new skills into real performance. They help leaders grow, reinforce critical thinking, accelerate adaptability, and preserve institutional knowledge through periods of change. In short, they serve as the human-in-the-loop mechanisms that ensure modernization efforts succeed.

The challenges ahead are clear—but so is the path forward. By pairing modern learning technologies with intentional, people-centered development, organizations can build a workforce that is both AI-enabled and deeply human. Our hope is that this report gives you the insight, data, and narrative you need to strengthen your strategy, secure buy-in, and champion investment in learning that prepares your organization for 2026 and beyond.

About Together
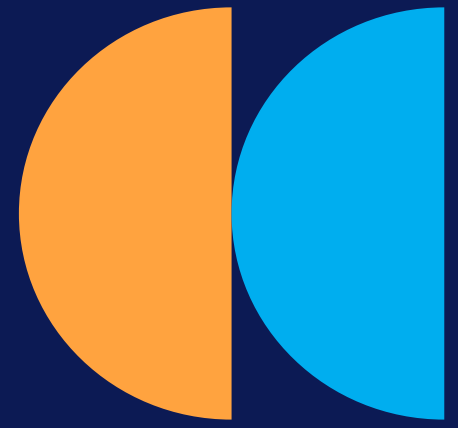
Together, from Absorb, makes it easy to unlock the power of mentorship and coaching in your organization. Our platform removes the manual burden of running mentorship and coaching programs by automating matching, guiding and supporting matches with session agendas, delivering actionable insights through built-in reporting, and more.

Our impact speaks for itself. G2—the leading software review site based on verified user feedback—has consistently ranked Together as the top mentoring platform for enterprise organizations.

Together Administrators Report...

94%
Improved Employee Skills

95%
A More Connected Company

100%
Improved Inclusion and Support

79%
Improved Retention

Some of our customers include

Crayon

Kellogg's

Heineken®

Discovery

Teladoc® HEALTH

NEW YORK LIFE FOUNDATION

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