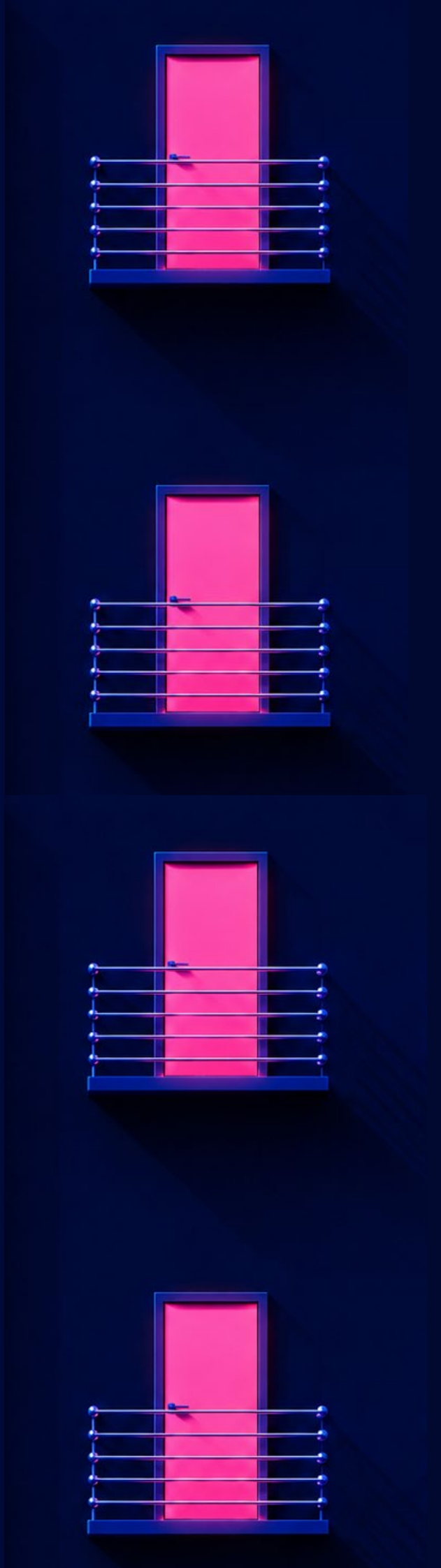
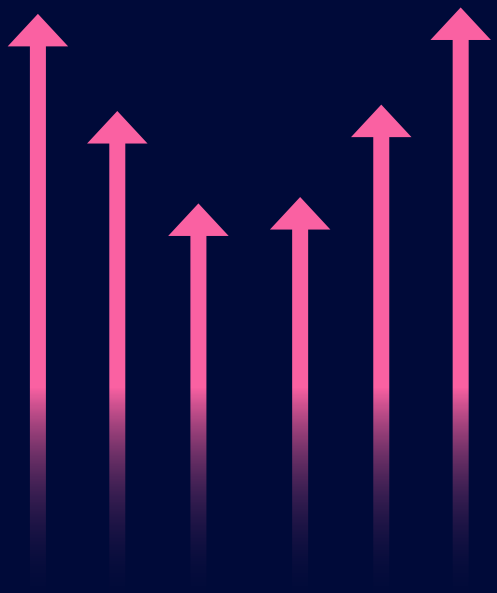
crf
CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

BPP
LYCEUM EDUCATION GROUP

EARLY CAREERS
AND SKILLS

EQUIPPING THE WORKFORCE FOR WHAT'S NEXT







CONTENTS

01 About CRF ---------- **03**
02 Partner Commentary ---------- **04**
03 Key Takeaways ---------- **06**
04 Recommendations ---------- **09**
05 Chapter 1: Early Careers in Context ---------- **10**
06 Chapter 2: Joining up the Early Careers System ---------- **30**
07 Chapter 3: CRF Framework for Developing Early Careers Talent ---------- **42**
08 Conclusions ---------- **63**
09 Research Participation List ---------- **64**

ABOUT CRF

CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

Corporate Research Forum (CRF) is a research-led learning network dedicated to building the capability of HR leaders and their teams to drive organisational performance.

Through more than 30 years of research and practical expertise, we have developed a deep understanding of the ways HR can contribute to business outcomes – what works, what doesn't and in what circumstances. We support our network of over 275 organisations through an evolving programme of evidence-based insights: delivering expert-led events, facilitated peer exchange and impactful technology-enabled learning.

Our focus enables HR to become a more strategic, future-ready function delivering consistent and measurable value tailored to the needs of modern organisations.

For more information on how CRF can support you and your organisation, please contact Richard Hargreaves, Managing Director, at richard@crforum.co.uk. Alternatively, please visit our website at www.crforum.co.uk.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This report was developed by experienced HR practitioners and researchers with expertise across talent, learning and organisational development.



GILLIAN PILLANS | RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Gillian has worked as a senior HR practitioner and organisational development specialist for organisations including Swiss Re, Vodafone and BAA. Prior to HR, she was a management consultant with Deloitte Consulting and is also a qualified solicitor.

As Research Director, Gillian has authored numerous CRF reports on leadership, talent and organisational development.



FLYNN THOMAS | RESEARCH EXECUTIVE

Flynn recently graduated from the University of Manchester with a First-Class Honours degree in English Literature.

As part of the research team, he contributes to the publication of original research and supports the development and adaptation of CRF content for the website and member communications.

PARTNER COMMENTARY

BPP





BPP
LYCEUM EDUCATION GROUP

PARTNER PERSPECTIVE
BPP

Early careers has become one of the clearest tests of whether organisations are serious about building future capability.

For those leading this agenda, the challenge is no longer simply about attracting graduates, apprentices or school leavers into the business. It is about making confident decisions in a landscape where the signals are noisy, expectations are rising and the traditional assumptions about how people become work ready no longer hold.

At the same time, organisations need early career talent to contribute sooner, stay longer and build the capabilities they cannot reliably buy from the external labour market. Demand for that talent continues to rise across sectors while the pool feeding it remains limited, so competition for the same people is growing fiercer. Together, these pressures have created a widening expectation gap: the bar for what constitutes a confident, work-ready hire has risen, even as the conditions that once developed that readiness have quietly worn away.
In our work with employers, the effects of this expectation gap are most visible. Application volumes may be high, but finding candidates with the right readiness, confidence and evidence of capability remains difficult. Pathways may be expanding, but progression through them is often uneven. AI may improve productivity, but it is also changing the early work through which judgment, resilience and professional confidence have traditionally been developed.

Although early careers is not disappearing, commitment is not the same as confidence, and investment is not the same as impact. Closing that gap is therefore not a matter of finding better candidates. It requires organisations to recognise where expectation and reality have drifted apart, and redesign rather than work around that gap. The real question is not whether organisations can find better candidates, but whether their early careers investment is building the capability they can rely on at the pace they now need.
For HR, talent and L&D leaders, these issues are not theoretical. They sit inside everyday decisions about programme design, work readiness, assessment, manager capability, hybrid working, retention and internal progression.

At BPP, we believe early careers should be treated as a strategic capability system, not a standalone route into the organisation. When organisations take this approach, they join up the moments that too often sit apart: how young people enter the business, how they build confidence, how managers support them and how progression connects to future workforce priorities. Done well, this creates a more integrated model, one that helps employers improve progression, strengthen workforce capability and increase the return on their investment.

Our work with employers focuses on helping organisations put that approach into practice by designing clearer pathways, developing the readiness and adaptability young people need to perform, and equipping managers to turn potential into progress. We also connect early careers activity to the wider skills landscape, ensuring investment is aligned with where capability demand is moving, not just where vacancies exist today.
This report offers a practical framework for that work. It sets out the evidence, the pressure points and the choices employers now face. Most importantly, it recognises that early careers is not just about bringing young people into work. It is about building the workforce your organisation will depend on next.

That makes this agenda difficult. It also makes it impossible to ignore.

PARTNER COMMENTARY

THE OXFORD GROUP

The Oxford Group
by City & Guilds

PARTNER PERSPECTIVE THE OXFORD GROUP

For more than 35 years, The Oxford Group has helped organisations develop leadership capability, coaching cultures and organisational performance. Working with global organisations across sectors, it supports leaders and teams to build the judgement, behaviours and capabilities needed to succeed in increasingly complex environments.

CAROLINE TAYLOR
Executive Director, The Oxford Group

The conversation around early careers has become increasingly prominent and hotly debated. On the one hand, there's growing concern that AI, automation and cost pressures are squeezing entry-level roles. On the other, most organisations are still investing in early talent because they know it's how future capability gets built.

What this research points to is something more grounded. Early careers aren't going anywhere, but they are changing quickly, and many of the assumptions we once took for granted no longer hold.

From our perspective at The Oxford Group, this isn't really a straightforward "skills gap" issue. It's about how capability develops in the real world.

People who perform well over time tend to share a few core strengths, especially those who become leaders. They can think clearly under pressure, make good calls, build relationships and deal with ambiguity. Those strengths don't come from training alone. They come from experience: doing the work, figuring things out, getting feedback and sometimes getting it wrong.

Early career roles used to provide plenty of those experiences. Whether someone joined as a graduate, an apprentice or through another route, they learned by doing. That's the bit that's now shifting.

AI is starting to take on some of the work people used to learn from. Hybrid working means less day-to-day visibility of how experienced colleagues operate, while people are entering the workplace through a wider range of routes with very different levels of experience behind them. Many early career hires can produce solid outputs, often quickly, but are less confident explaining how they got there, challenging their thinking or spotting when something doesn't quite stack up. There's a growing gap between output and understanding.

That shifts the responsibility. We can't just assume people will "pick it up" anymore. If the experiences that build judgment and confidence no longer happen naturally, they need to be created more deliberately.

Used well, AI can speed things up and support learning. Used badly, it can cut learning out altogether. There's a big difference between using AI to support your thinking and using it instead of thinking. If people don't get the chance to work things through themselves, make decisions, see what happens and adjust, they don't build the instincts they need.

The good news is that many organisations are already responding. They're rethinking early careers, opening up new pathways, placing greater emphasis on critical thinking, communication and adaptability, and recognising just how important managers are in shaping early development.

But this isn't something employers can fix on their own. Early careers sits within a bigger system: education, employers and government all play a part. If we want people to be better prepared, those parts need to connect more closely than they sometimes do now.

For us, the takeaway is simple. The early careers challenge isn't just about hiring. It's about how organisations build capability for the long term. The organisations getting this right are thinking about it as a whole system: how people come in, what they experience, how they develop and how that links to where the business is going.

Increasingly, we're working with organisations on exactly this: rethinking those early experiences so people build real judgment earlier, rather than years down the line. This might mean giving people more meaningful work, developing emotional intelligence so they understand themselves and work effectively with others, helping managers create everyday moments of reflection and feedback, or ensuring AI is used responsibly in day-to-day work.

The organisations that get this right aren't just improving outcomes for early-career talent. They're building a talent ecosystem that strengthens capability, resilience and performance over the long term.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01

The public narrative around early careers has become increasingly pessimistic.
Advances in AI and rising employment costs have fuelled concern that entry-level roles are being hollowed out. Our research suggests a more nuanced picture. The early careers market is cooling, but it is not collapsing.

02

Employers are not retreating from early careers.
More than half expect their volume of early careers hiring to increase over the next two to three years, while fewer than one in five expect a reduction. Similarly, two-thirds expect AI and automation either to increase the number of entry-level roles in their organisation or leave them broadly unchanged. The bigger story is not the disappearance of early careers, but the redesign of what entry-level work looks like, what capabilities employers require and how those capabilities are developed.

03

Early careers remains a strategic investment.
Employers are not primarily investing in early careers to fill immediate vacancies. They see it as a way of building a sustainable pipeline of future talent, developing emerging capabilities and supporting longer-term workforce plans. This means early careers should not be viewed simply as a recruitment activity. Done well, it is a core element of strategic workforce planning.

04

However, the environment in which employers are making these investments is becoming more difficult.
Application volumes have risen sharply, partly because AI has made it easier for candidates to create and tailor multiple applications. This has intensified competition for graduates and increased the operational burden on employers. At the same time, employers report a growing mismatch between the volume of applications and the quality or readiness of candidates. The result is that early careers hiring is becoming more complex, more resource-intensive and harder to manage well.

05

AI is affecting early careers, but not simply by replacing entry-level jobs.
It is changing the skills required, the nature of early work and the way people build expertise. Employers are placing greater emphasis on capabilities such as adaptability, critical thinking, judgment, communication and AI literacy. Yet many of the experiences through which young people traditionally developed these capabilities, including work experience, part-time jobs and routine early-career tasks, are becoming less available or less reliable.

06

This creates a development challenge.
Nearly two-thirds of employers agree that AI is reducing the amount of routine, lower-risk work through which early careers hires have traditionally built skills. These tasks may not always have been glamorous, but they often provided the lower rungs of the learning ladder. As AI takes on more of this work, employers need to think deliberately about how judgment, confidence and professional capability will be developed in the future. The answer is unlikely to be simply giving new entrants access to AI tools. In some cases, it may mean slowing down, limiting AI use for certain tasks, or designing learning experiences that ensure people still develop the underlying capability to evaluate, challenge and improve AI outputs.

07

Employers are also having to do more to support the transition from education into work.
Many report gaps in communication, self-management, professional behaviours and resilience. This does not mean young people are less capable than previous generations but may reflect the fact that they have had fewer opportunities to acquire and demonstrate workplace habits before entering employment. Employers therefore need to be realistic about what "work ready" means at entry level and design programmes that help people make the transition successfully.

08

This is not a challenge employers can solve alone.
Early careers sits within a wider system involving government, education providers, employers and young people themselves. Education builds essential foundations, but it cannot replicate every aspect of work. Government can shape the conditions for investment through funding, regulation and policy stability, but it cannot create workplace experience. Employers cannot simply act as consumers of talent and assume the wider system will produce fully work-ready candidates. They need to become more active participants in shaping future workforce capability.

09

This means stronger engagement with schools, colleges, universities, training providers, government and industry bodies.
Workplace experience needs to become a more integral part of education and skills development, not an optional extra available only to those with the confidence, connections or resources to access it. Employers have an important role to play in opening up access to work, making expectations clearer and helping young people understand what different roles and career routes actually involve.

10

The routes into early careers are also becoming more varied.
Employers are moving beyond a simple graduate versus apprentice distinction and designing a wider portfolio of pathways to meet different workforce needs. Graduate programmes, apprenticeships, school leaver routes, vocational pathways and shorter skills-based programmes each have a role to play. The boundaries between these pathways are becoming less fixed, and employers need to ensure they offer comparable status and opportunity across different routes, with progression determined by performance and capability rather than by the label attached to the entry pathway.

11

The most effective employers view early careers as a long-term talent system rather than a set of disconnected programmes.
This starts with future workforce needs. Organisations need to ask what capabilities they will require in three, five or even ten years' time, which of these capabilities can be bought externally and which need to be built internally. Early careers programmes should then be designed as one mechanism for building that future capability.

OUR RESEARCH IDENTIFIES SIX INTERCONNECTED ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE EARLY CAREERS STRATEGY:

1. Start with Future Workforce Needs
2. Design the Right Portfolio of Pathways
3. Build Capability and Work Readiness to Drive Performance
4. Create the Scaffolding for Success
5. Connect Early Careers to the Wider Talent System
6. Measure Impact and Continuously Adapt

13

Starting with future workforce needs means connecting business strategy, early careers programmes and long-term capability requirements.
he key questions are: What capabilities will the organisation need in the medium and long term? Which entry routes can most effectively build these capabilities?

14

Designing the right portfolio of pathways means matching different entry routes to different business needs, learning journeys and talent pools.
The challenge is to ensure these routes form part of a coherent talent system rather than a collection of separate initiatives.

15

Building capability and work readiness means providing structured support to build the habits, confidence and professional behaviours required to perform well.
Employers need to be realistic about what level of work readiness can be expected at entry level and design their learning programmes accordingly.

16

Creating the scaffolding for success means paying attention to the environment around early careers talent.
Line managers are particularly important in helping young people navigate the transition into work. Employers therefore need to select managers carefully, define expectations and equip them to provide the structure, coaching and feedback early careers talent needs.

17

Connecting early careers to the wider talent system is essential if employers are to realise the return on their investment.
The transition from an early careers programme into a permanent role is a common point of risk. Early careers should therefore be linked to career development, internal mobility, succession planning and future leadership pipelines.

18

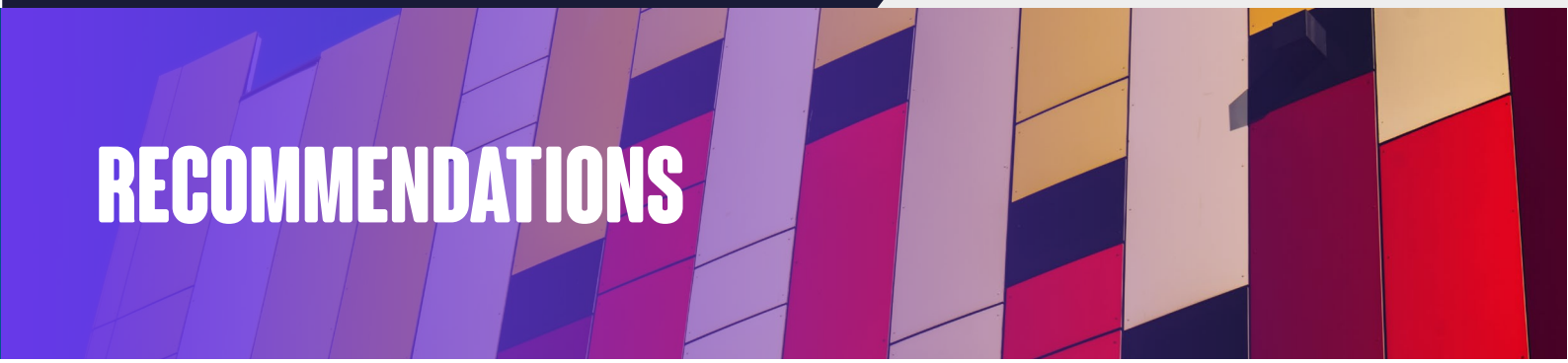
Early careers programmes need to be measured as long-term investments.
Employers need to track whether early careers programmes are cost effective, improving performance, reducing time to competence, supporting retention, building critical capabilities and widening access to opportunity. Measuring impact also means building feedback loops so programmes can be adapted as labour market conditions, technology and business needs change.

19

The overall message from this research is that early careers remains a vital source of future capability, but the assumptions on which many programmes were built are changing.
Employers need to be more intentional about the capabilities they are building, the pathways they are designing, the support they provide and the outcomes they measure.

20

Early careers is not disappearing.
But it does need to be redesigned for a labour market in which technology, education, work and skills are all changing at the same time.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use the CRF Early Careers Framework to audit your current approach and identify opportunities for improvement.
A useful starting point is to bring together early careers, workforce planning, talent, learning and business stakeholders and test the current approach against the six elements of the framework. For each area, ask: what assumptions do we currently hold that are no longer working, what evidence do we have and what would we need to change to deliver the business outcomes we require?

KEY QUESTIONS:

1. **Start with Future Workforce Needs:** Do we have a clear view of the future capabilities, critical roles and workforce risks early careers has to address and in what timescales?
2. **Design the Right Portfolio of Pathways:** Do our graduate, apprentice, school leaver, placement and other routes each serve a clear purpose? Are we missing out on opportunities?
3. **Build Capability and Work Readiness to Drive Performance:** Have we updated the skills and behaviours early careers talent needs to perform in the current context? How must our learning interventions and development pathways adapt to AI? Do we need to update hybrid working policies to ensure young people have access to on-the-job development and support?
4. **Create the Scaffolding for Success:** Are our line managers and mentors well-enough equipped to support early careers talent effectively, or is too much left to individual goodwill?
5. **Connect Early Careers to the Wider Talent System:** Where are our greatest retention risks? Is there a clear enough route from early careers into permanent roles, development pathways, internal mobility and succession pipelines?
6. **Measure Impact and Continuously Adapt:** Are we measuring the business outcomes that matter - capability, performance and retention?

2. Treat the early careers system as something to influence, not just navigate. Decide where the organisation has a legitimate interest in shaping the system and where it is worth investing time and influence. This does not mean trying to engage with every policy consultation or skills initiative. It means identifying the few areas where external decisions will materially affect future talent supply and taking a more active role in shaping them. It's important to be specific about which capabilities you need, where shortages are likely to emerge, which pathways are working and where funding or regulation is getting in the way.

3. Use collective voice where individual employer influence is limited. Few employers can shape the skills system alone. Industry bodies, regional employer forums, local skills partnerships, chambers of commerce and sector groups can help translate individual employer needs into a stronger collective signal. Larger organisations can play a useful anchor role here, particularly by using their data, experience and convening power to strengthen the employer voice.

4. Widen access to work experience. The Milburn Review highlights the long-term cost of young people becoming detached from education and employment. Employers cannot solve the NEET challenge alone, but they can address lack of access to real work. Employers can offer work experience as part of their wider impact on society, contributing to the conditions through which young people build confidence and employability.

5. Make it easy for the business to offer meaningful work experience. Create simple, repeatable models that managers can use without having to design something from scratch. This might include a central coordinating person or team, a standard one-week placement template, a menu of suitable tasks, guidance for supervisors, safeguarding processes, pre-prepared briefings, reflection exercises and clear expectations about what participants should gain.

6. Design work experience for those who need it most, not only those best placed to access it. It's important to not just offer schemes for those who already know how to find opportunities or benefit from contacts. Practical changes might include paid placements, simple application processes, random selection for oversubscribed schemes, partnerships with schools and charities in high-NEET areas and guaranteed feedback or interviews. The test should be whether the scheme opens doors for young people who would not otherwise get through them.

7. Build two-way partnerships with education around experience as well as curriculum. Work with schools, colleges, universities and training providers to educate them on your expectations as an employer and to jointly design pathways into work. This can include shaping vocational programmes, workplace visits, project-based learning, assessment centre practice, mentoring and industry challenges as well as work experience. The aim should be to help young people build familiarity with work before they have to compete for it.



CHAPTER 1

EARLY CAREERS IN CONTEXT

The report begins by exploring how the context surrounding early careers is changing. It examines the labour market, shifting employer priorities, advances in AI and the changing environments through which young people develop workplace capability, explaining why many organisations are rethinking their early careers strategies.

CHAPTER 2 Explores how workforce capability is created through the interaction of employers, education and government, and why no single part of the system can prepare young people for work in isolation. It considers the distinct role each stakeholder plays and argues that employers increasingly need to become active participants in shaping the conditions through which future workforce capability is developed.

CHAPTER 3 Translates the report's findings into a practical framework for designing and delivering effective early careers strategies. Drawing on research and employer practice, it sets out six interconnected elements that help organisations build the future capabilities they need while improving the transition from education into work.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EARLY CAREERS?

Throughout this report, we use the term **early careers** to describe the broad range of pathways through which people enter and begin their working lives. This includes graduate programmes, apprenticeships, school leaver programmes, internships, placements, work experience and other structured entry routes. While these pathways differ in purpose and design, they share a common objective: helping individuals develop the capabilities needed to contribute effectively at work while supporting organisations in building future workforce capability. The focus of this report is therefore not on any single-entry route, but on the wider early careers system through which future workforce capability is developed.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Many of the findings presented throughout this report draw on a survey conducted jointly by CRF and BPP of more than 500 senior HR, Talent, Learning and Early Careers professionals, predominantly from UK employers, while also including multinational organisations operating across Europe and other global regions. Response numbers vary slightly between questions due to partial responses and question-specific completion rates. The relevant sample size is reported alongside each chart and figure. The survey findings are complemented throughout the report by employer interviews, external labour market evidence and published research.

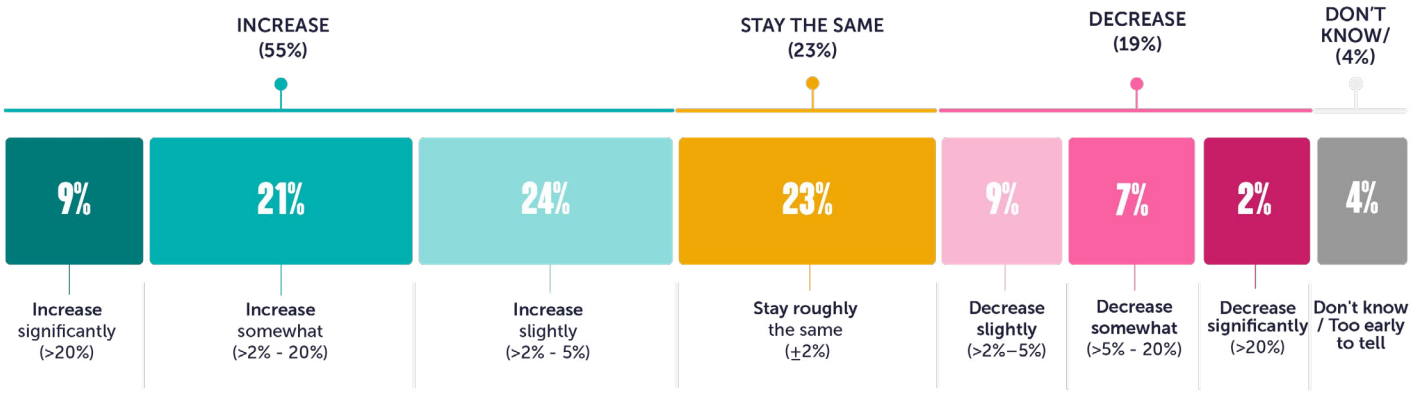
1.1 THE MARKET FOR EARLY CAREERS IS COOLING, NOT COLLAPSING

The public narrative around early careers has become increasingly pessimistic. Rising employment costs, weaker economic growth and advances in AI have fuelled concern that entry-level opportunities are disappearing. However, our research suggests a more nuanced picture. While the market has undoubtedly become more challenging, the evidence points to continued employer demand for early careers rather than widespread retrenchment.

More than half (55%) of employers expect their early careers hiring to increase over the next two to three years, while a further 23% expect it to remain broadly unchanged. Fewer than one in five (19%) anticipate a reduction. Views on AI are more mixed, but two-thirds (67%) of employers expect AI and automation either to increase the number of entry-level roles in their organisation or leave them broadly unchanged, compared with just over one-quarter (27%) who expect a reduction. Despite growing uncertainty, the overall picture is one of continued employer demand for early careers, with most organisations expecting hiring to remain stable or grow over the coming years.

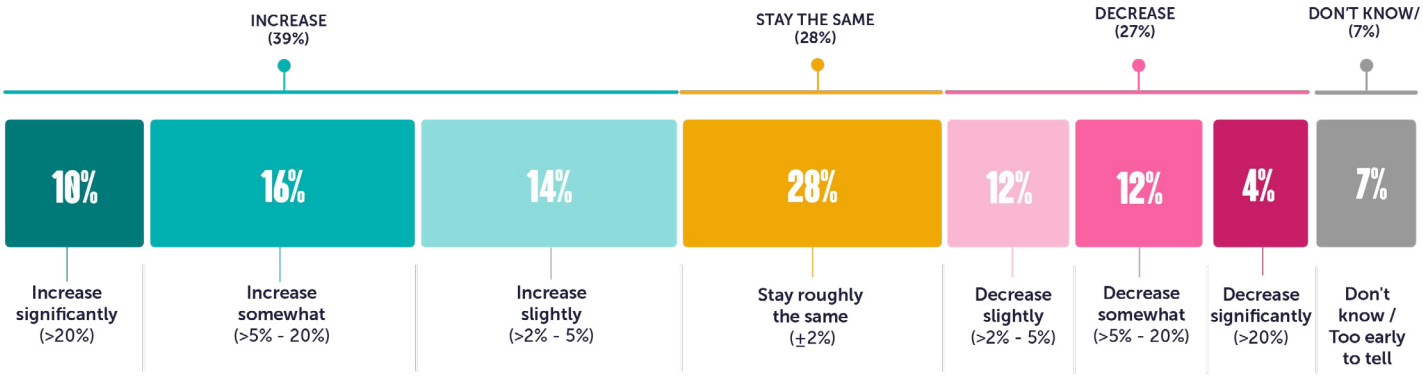
EXPECTED CHANGE IN EARLY CAREERS HIRING OVER THE NEXT 2–3 YEARS

Responses: 506



EXPECTED IMPACT OF AI AND AUTOMATION ON ENTRY-LEVEL ROLES OVER THE NEXT 2-3 YEARS

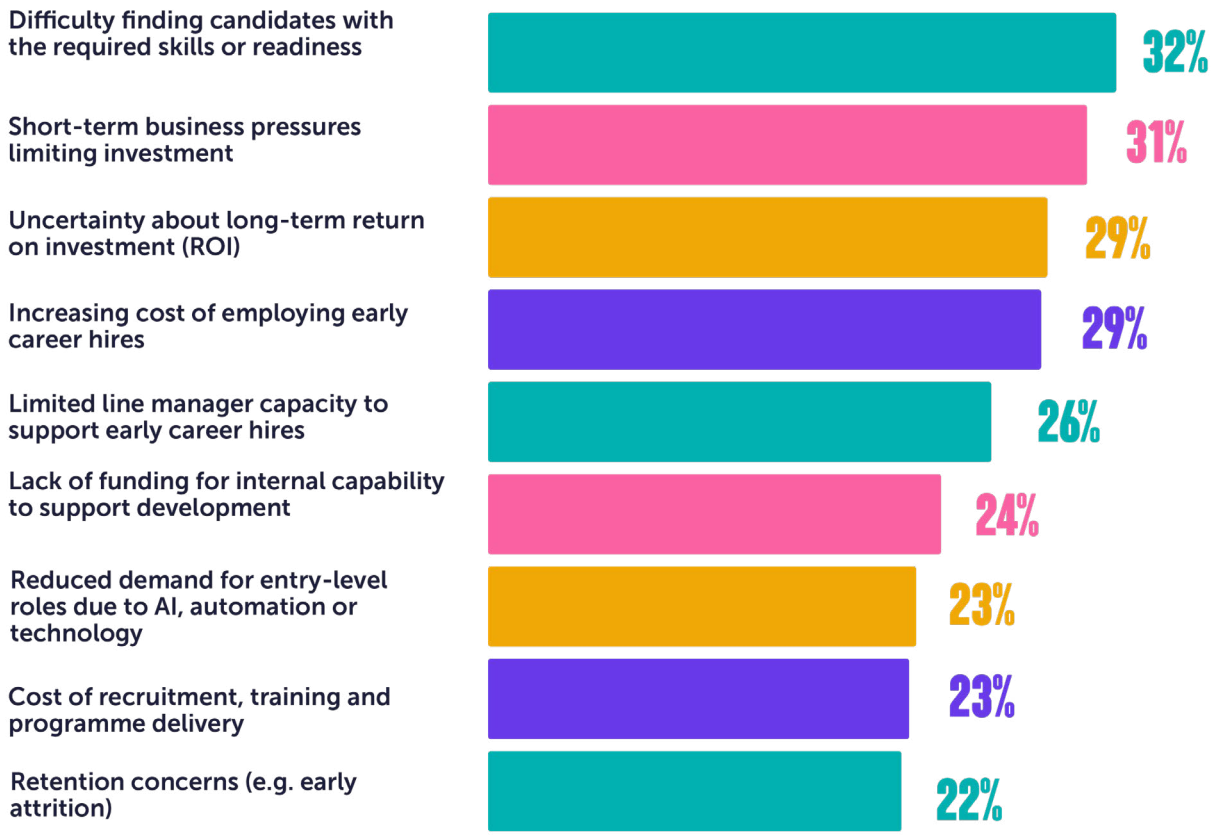
Responses: 504



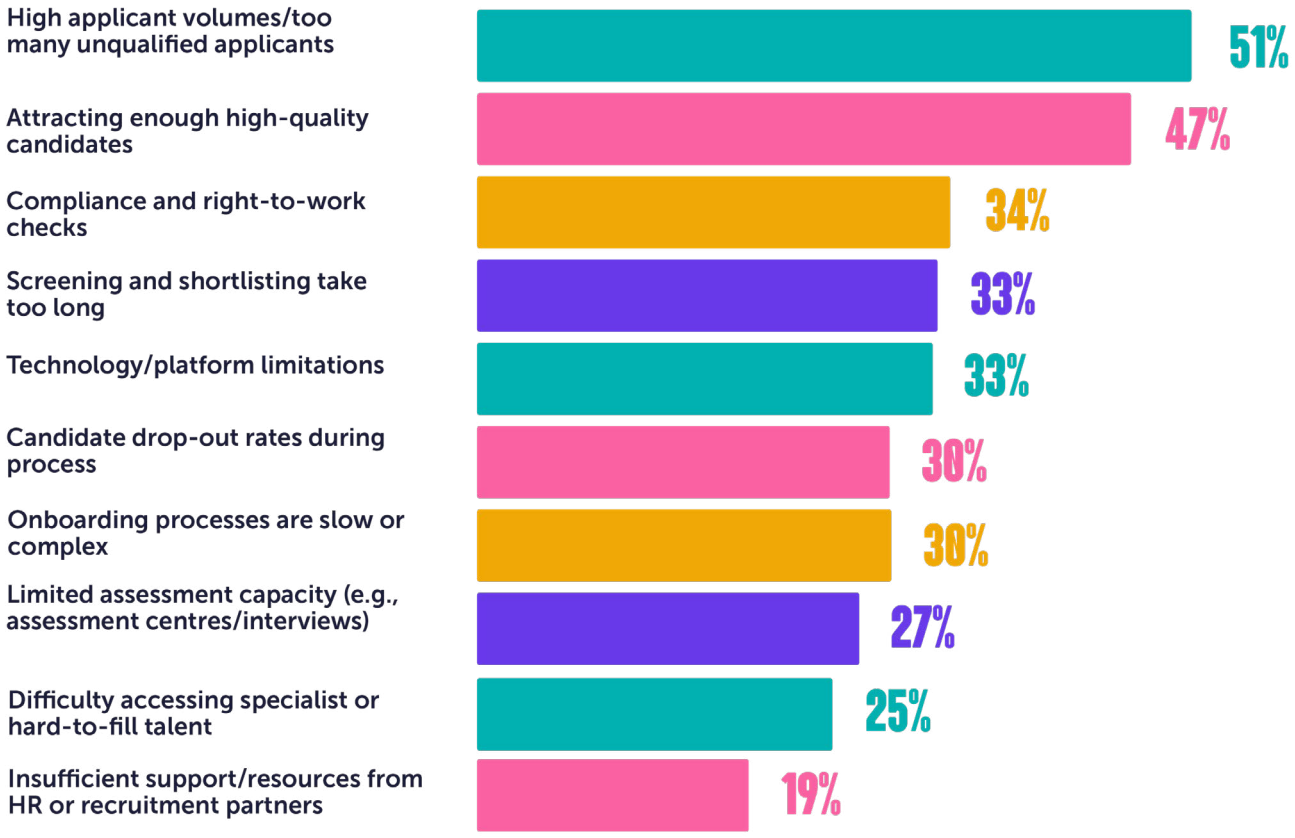
The broadly positive outlook should not be interpreted as an absence of challenges. Employers continue to face significant constraints on expanding early careers recruitment. Around one-third identify difficulty finding candidates with the required skills or work readiness (32%) and short-term business pressures limiting investment (31%) as major or critical barriers. Uncertainty about the long-term return on investment (29%) and rising employment costs (29%) also feature prominently, while around one in four cite limited line manager capacity, insufficient internal capability to support development and the impact of AI and automation. These findings suggest that employers remain committed to early careers but are doing so in a more constrained operating environment.

MAJOR AND CRITICAL BARRIERS TO EXPANDING EARLY CAREERS HIRING

Total responses: 485



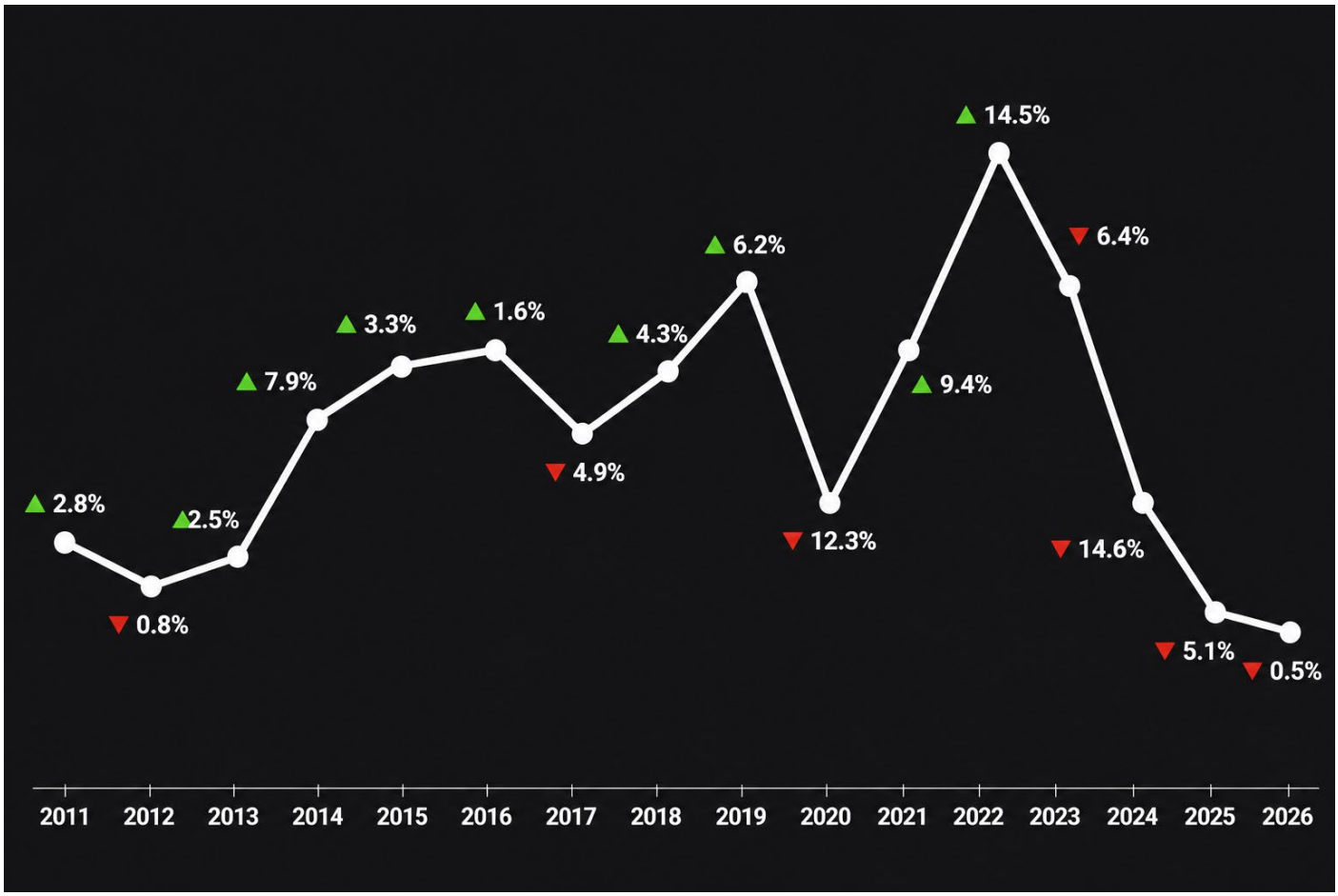
These strategic constraints are reflected in employers' day-to-day recruitment experience. BPP's March 2026 research found that employers receive high volumes of unqualified applicants (51%) while still struggling to attract enough high-quality candidates (47%), pointing to a mismatch between application volume and candidate suitability. Screening and shortlisting are also time intensive (33%), while candidate drop-out during recruitment (30%) further reduces conversion. Together, these findings suggest that recruiting early career talent has become more resource intensive, even where employers remain committed to hiring.



SOURCE: BPP

Looking beyond employer expectations, evidence from the wider graduate labour market also paints a similarly nuanced picture. High Fliers' The Graduate Market in 2026, an annual survey of the UK's 100 leading graduate employers, reports that graduate vacancies have fallen for a third consecutive year and are now around a quarter below their 2022 peak. This reduction is larger than that recorded during the 2008-09 recession.

CHANGES TO GRADUATE VACANCIES AT THE UK'S TOP EMPLOYERS 2011 TO 2026

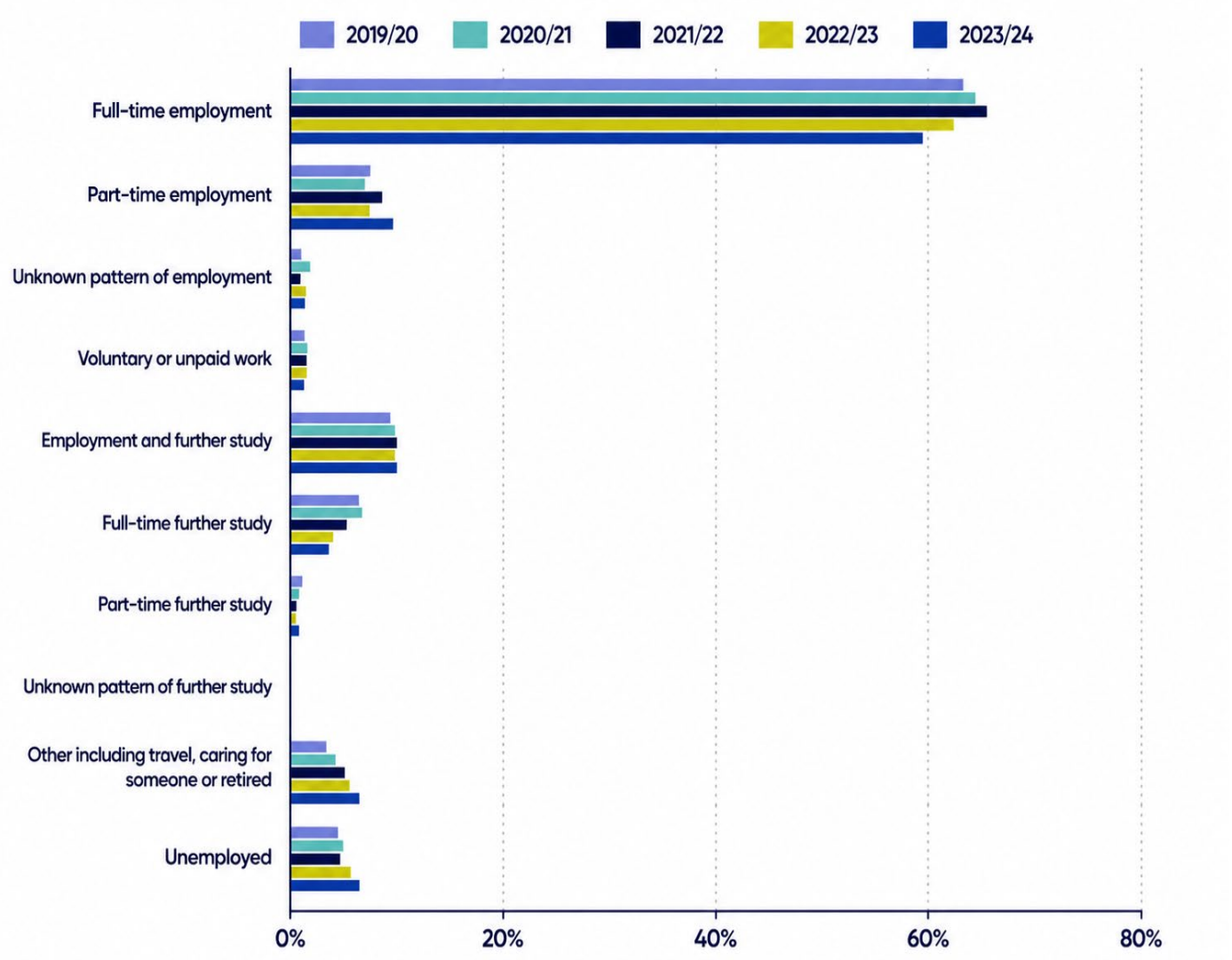


Source: The Graduate Market 2026, High Fliers Research.

However, graduate recruitment tells only part of the story. The Graduate Outcomes survey, published annually by HESA, provides a different perspective by tracking graduates' employment, further study and other activities approximately 15 months after completing higher education. The latest release, published in June 2026, includes responses from 353,755 graduates who completed their studies during the 2023/24 academic year. Despite a more challenging recruitment market, graduate employment has remained relatively resilient:

- **81% of graduates were in employment or unpaid work 15 months after graduation,** only slightly below the post-pandemic peak of 83% in 2021/22 and broadly in line with the 80–82% range recorded over the past five years.
- **75% of employed graduates were working in professional-level occupations,** only slightly below the 76% recorded in 2022/23.
- **7% of graduates reported being unemployed and looking for work,** up from 6% in 2022/23 and 5% in both 2020/21 and 2021/22.

GRADUATE ACTIVITIES APPROXIMATELY 15 MONTHS AFTER COMPLETING HIGHER EDUCATION, ACADEMIC YEARS 2019/20 TO 2023/24



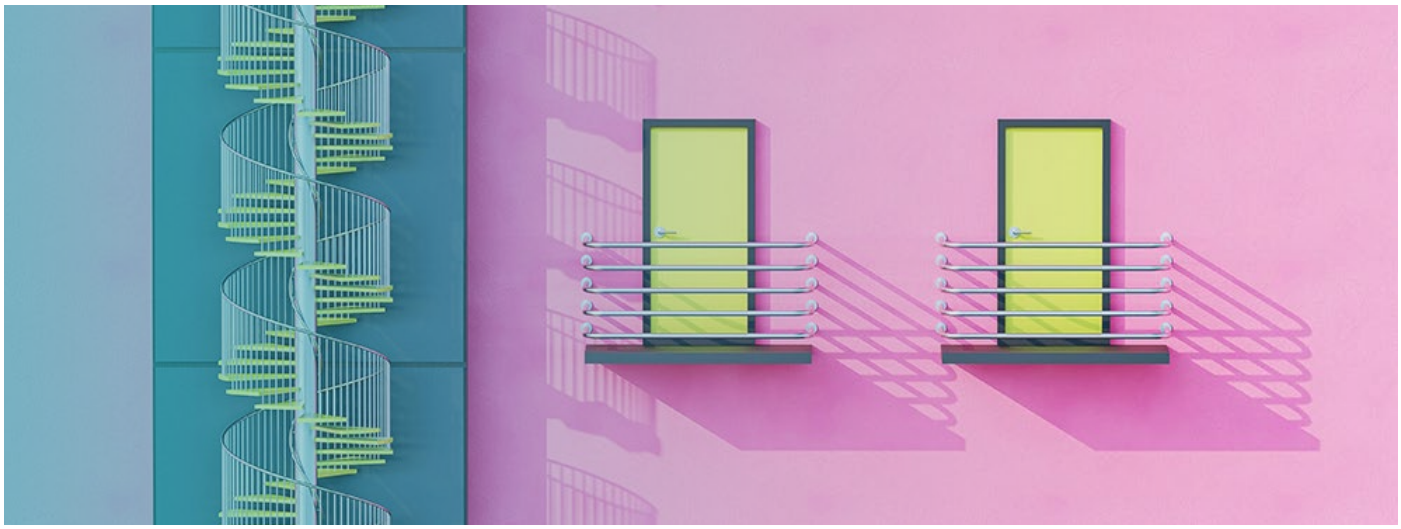
Source: HESA, Graduate Outcomes 2023/24.

Rather than presenting contradictory evidence, these datasets provide complementary perspectives on the labour market. High Fliers focuses on recruitment into graduate programmes at the UK's largest employers, while HESA provides a broader view of graduates' destinations across the labour market. The contrast suggests that, while the traditional 'front door' into professional employment is becoming narrower and more competitive, graduate talent continues to find employment across the wider labour market.

The contrast also illustrates how different indicators can paint very different pictures of the state of early careers. As Charlie Ball, Head of Labour Market Intelligence at Jisc, explains, *"the main problem facing early careers is not a collapse in demand, but a deterioration in the quality of the information environment around the labour market, where noise, misinterpretation and confusion can make conditions appear far worse than the underlying evidence suggests."* Two developments help explain why this perception has emerged.

FIRST, TODAY'S LABOUR MARKET IS OFTEN BEING COMPARED WITH AN EXCEPTIONAL PERIOD. In the aftermath of Covid-19, UK vacancies reached a record high of around 1.3 million in 2022. Against this unusually strong benchmark, subsequent declines may reflect a return towards longer-term labour market conditions rather than a fundamental collapse in employer demand.

SECOND, THE EXPERIENCE OF APPLYING FOR EARLY CAREERS ROLES HAS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY. The ISE *Student Recruitment Survey* (2025) found that the average graduate vacancy attracted 140 applications in 2024–25, the highest ratio on record. While multiple factors are likely to be contributing to this increase, generative AI has reduced the time and effort required to prepare and tailor applications, enabling candidates to apply for a greater number of roles. As a result, employers receive significantly higher volumes of applications for each vacancy, making recruitment more resource-intensive and reinforcing perceptions of an increasingly difficult labour market, even where underlying demand for early career talent remains resilient.



Overall, the evidence so far suggests that early careers is not disappearing but changing. Employer demand remains resilient, yet the routes through which people enter work are becoming more competitive, and the labour market has become increasingly difficult to interpret.

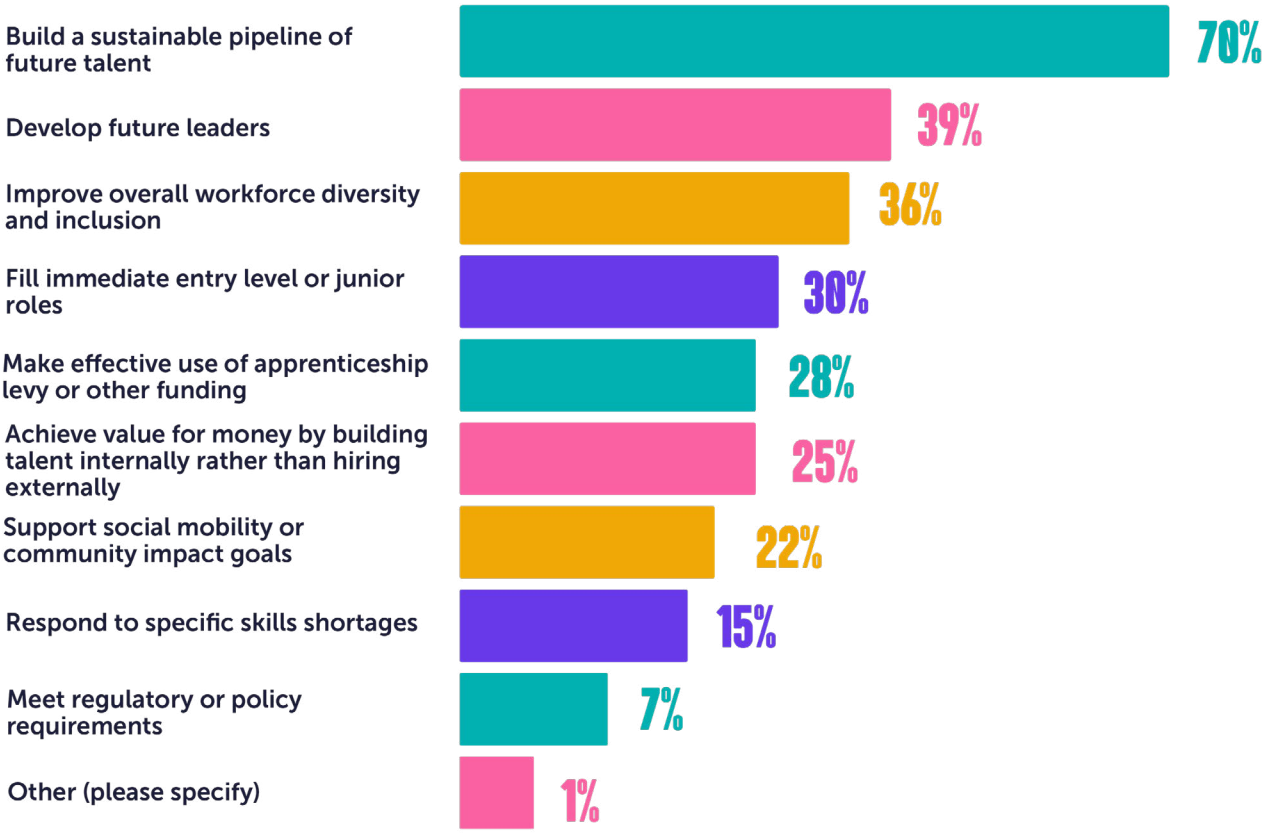
Challenging the narrative of decline is important, but it does not fully explain why early careers has become an increasingly prominent strategic issue for employers. That question requires looking beyond labour market demand to the changing nature of work itself and the capabilities organisations increasingly need from people entering the workforce.

1.2 IN SPITE OF CONSTRAINTS, EARLY CAREERS REMAINS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Employers' continued commitment to early careers reflects its strategic value. When asked about the primary objectives of early careers hiring, building a sustainable pipeline of future talent was by far the most common response, selected by 70% of employers. Developing future leaders (39%) and improving workforce diversity and inclusion (36%) also ranked ahead of filling immediate entry-level or junior roles (30%). Responding to specific skills shortages was selected by only 15% of employers, while meeting regulatory or policy requirements was selected by just 7%.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF EARLY CAREERS HIRING

Responses: 522

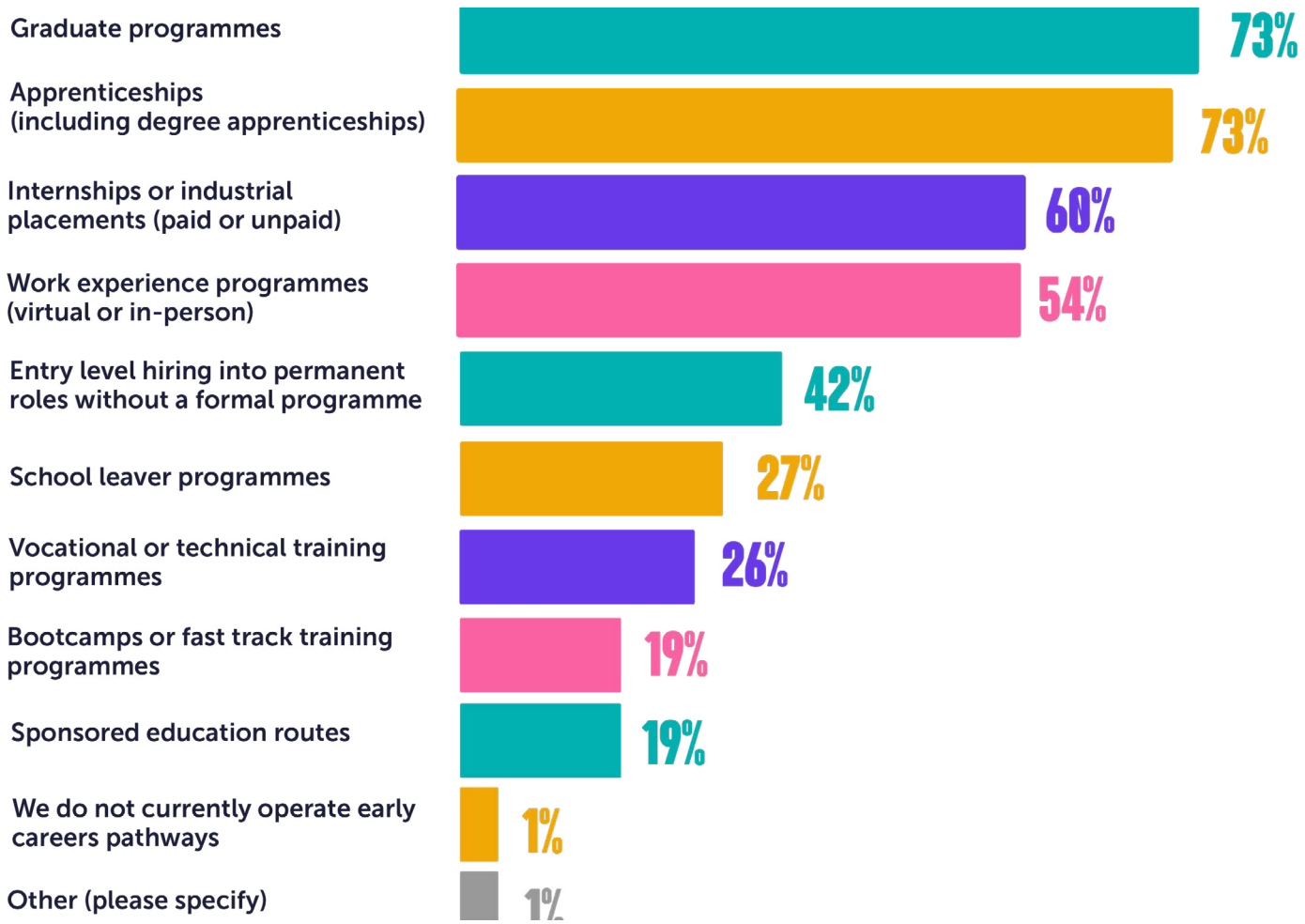


If employers largely view early careers as a means of building the workforce they will need in the future, it helps explain why early careers remains high on the organisational agenda, even as labour market conditions become more challenging. It also explains why employers are increasingly redesigning their programmes to develop the capabilities they will need in the future.

This strategic focus is also reflected in the range of early careers pathways employers currently operate. Graduate programmes (73%) and apprenticeships (73%) are almost equally common, while around six in ten employers offer internships or industrial placements (60%) and more than half provide work experience programmes (54%). Many also recruit directly into permanent entry-level roles (42%), alongside school leaver programmes (27%), vocational or technical training programmes (26%) and other structured entry routes. Rather than relying on a single pathway, many employers are investing across a portfolio of routes through which future workforce capability can be developed.

EARLY CAREERS PATHWAYS CURRENTLY USED BY EMPLOYERS

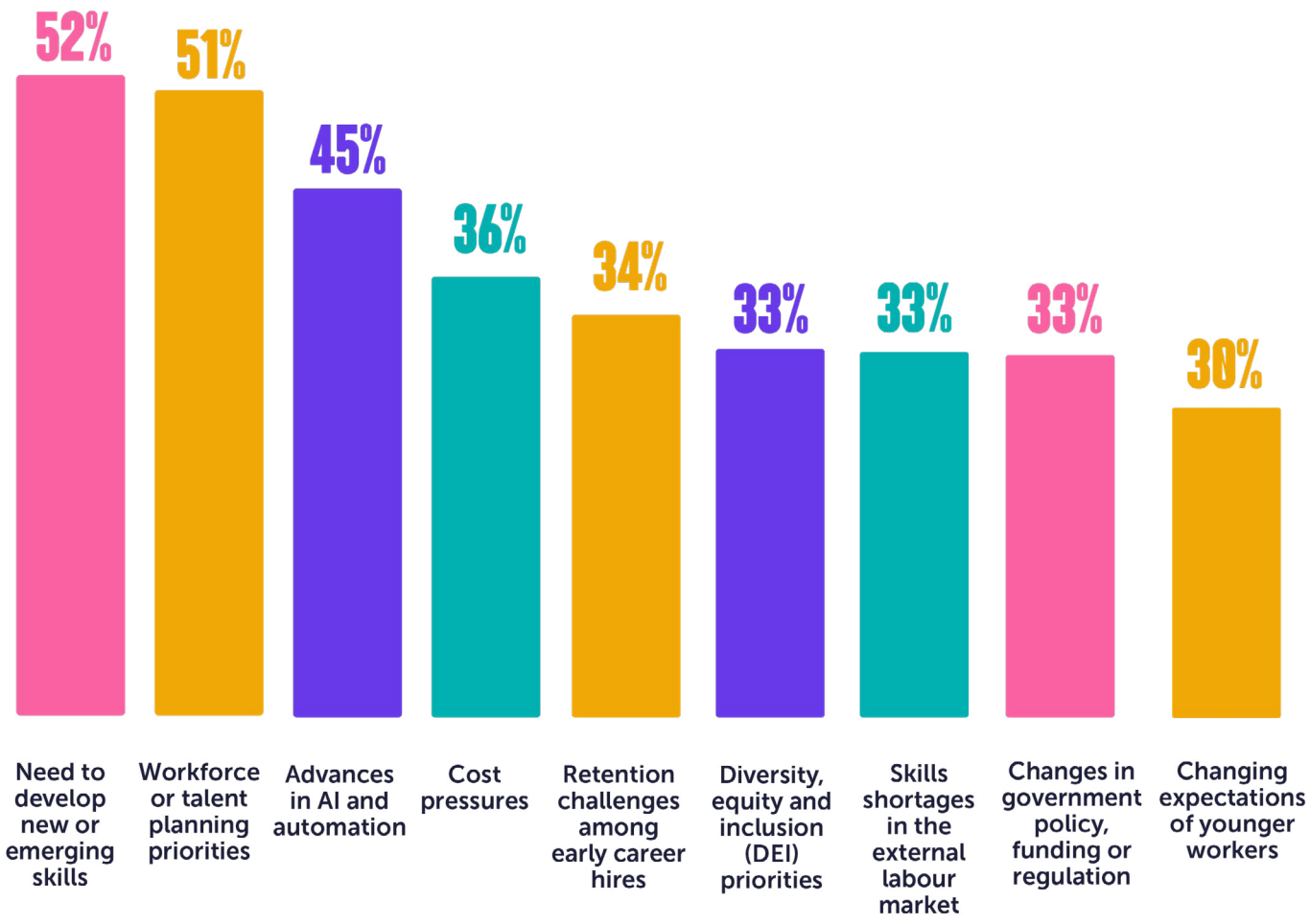
Responses: 522



When asked about the biggest drivers of change in their early careers strategy, employers identified the need to develop new or emerging skills (52%), workforce and talent planning priorities (51%) and advances in AI and automation (45%) as the three most significant drivers. While cost pressures (36%), retention challenges among early career hires (34%), skills shortages in the external labour market (33%) and changes in government policy, funding or regulation (33%) also influence employer decisions, they rank lower.

MAJOR AND CRITICAL DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN EARLY CAREERS STRATEGY

Responses: 506



However, while the purpose of early careers remains relatively stable, the context in which it operates is changing. Technological change is reshaping the nature of entry-level work and the capabilities employers increasingly value, while the environments through which those capabilities are developed are also evolving. Together, these developments mean the challenge facing employers is no longer simply identifying the capabilities they need, but ensuring people have opportunities to develop them.

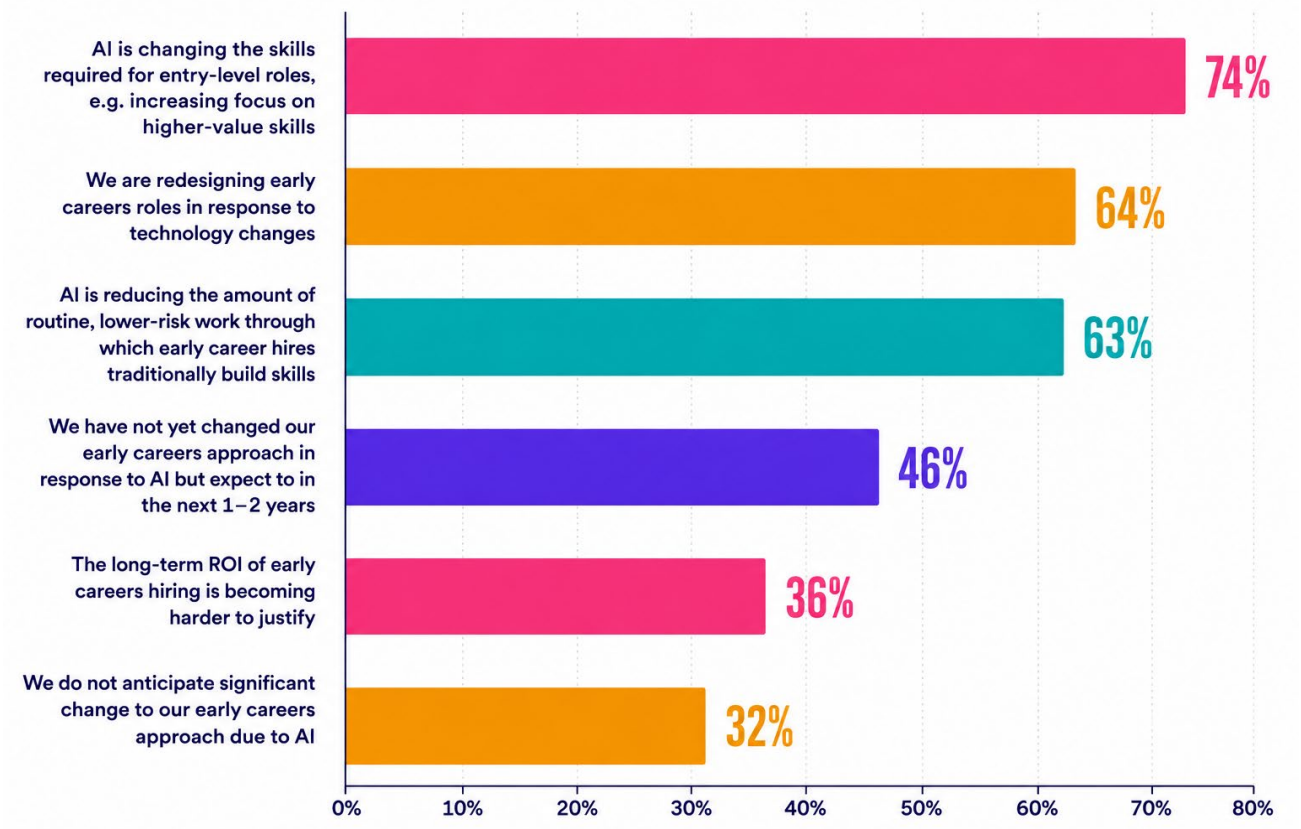
1.3 AI IS DRIVING AN EVOLUTION IN THE CAPABILITIES EMPLOYERS VALUE

> *"The challenge is not preparing young people for a specific AI tool. It is preparing them for a labour market characterised by continual technological change."*
>
> **Ben Blackledge,** CEO, WorldSkills UK

When asked about the impact of AI and automation on early careers, almost three-quarters of employers (74%) agreed or strongly agreed that AI is changing the skills required for entry-level roles. Around two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that they are redesigning early careers roles in response to technological change (64%) and that AI is reducing the amount of routine, lower-risk work through which early career hires have traditionally built skills (63%).

HOW AI IS RESHAPING EARLY CAREERS

Responses: 504



Wider labour market evidence suggests this change is not occurring uniformly. PwC's 2026 *Global AI Jobs Barometer* describes a "two-track" labour market in which demand for some entry-level roles is declining while others are becoming "seniorised", placing greater emphasis on judgment, decision making and leadership. Since 2019, demand for these seniorised entry-level roles has grown by 35%, while demand for other entry-level roles has fallen by 10%. Rather than pointing to the disappearance of entry-level work, these findings suggest AI is redefining what "entry-level" means.

The response, however, is not simply to recruit for a new set of technical skills. As AI reshapes entry-level work in different ways across different roles, employers are placing greater emphasis on capabilities that remain valuable regardless of how technology evolves, enabling people to adapt, learn and work effectively alongside new technologies. In this sense, early careers can be viewed not as a function vulnerable to AI-driven change, but as one of the principal mechanisms through which organisations build the adaptable workforce that technological change requires. As Tom Lewis, Policy Adviser at Universities UK, observes, *"Rather than viewing early career talent as vulnerable to technological change, many employers see them as part of the response to it."*

This changing emphasis is reflected in wider employer research. The ISE Student Development Survey (2026) found that employers were almost twice as likely to report developing digital skills internally as recruiting them externally. At the same time, while AI was reducing the importance of routine administrative, research and technical tasks, employers reported increasing demand for capabilities across five broad areas:

FIVE DURABLE CAPABILITIES IN HIGHER DEMAND

1. Critical thinking and judgment

2. AI literacy and the ability to work with AI tools

3. Communication and interpersonal skills

4. Adaptability, curiosity and continuous learning

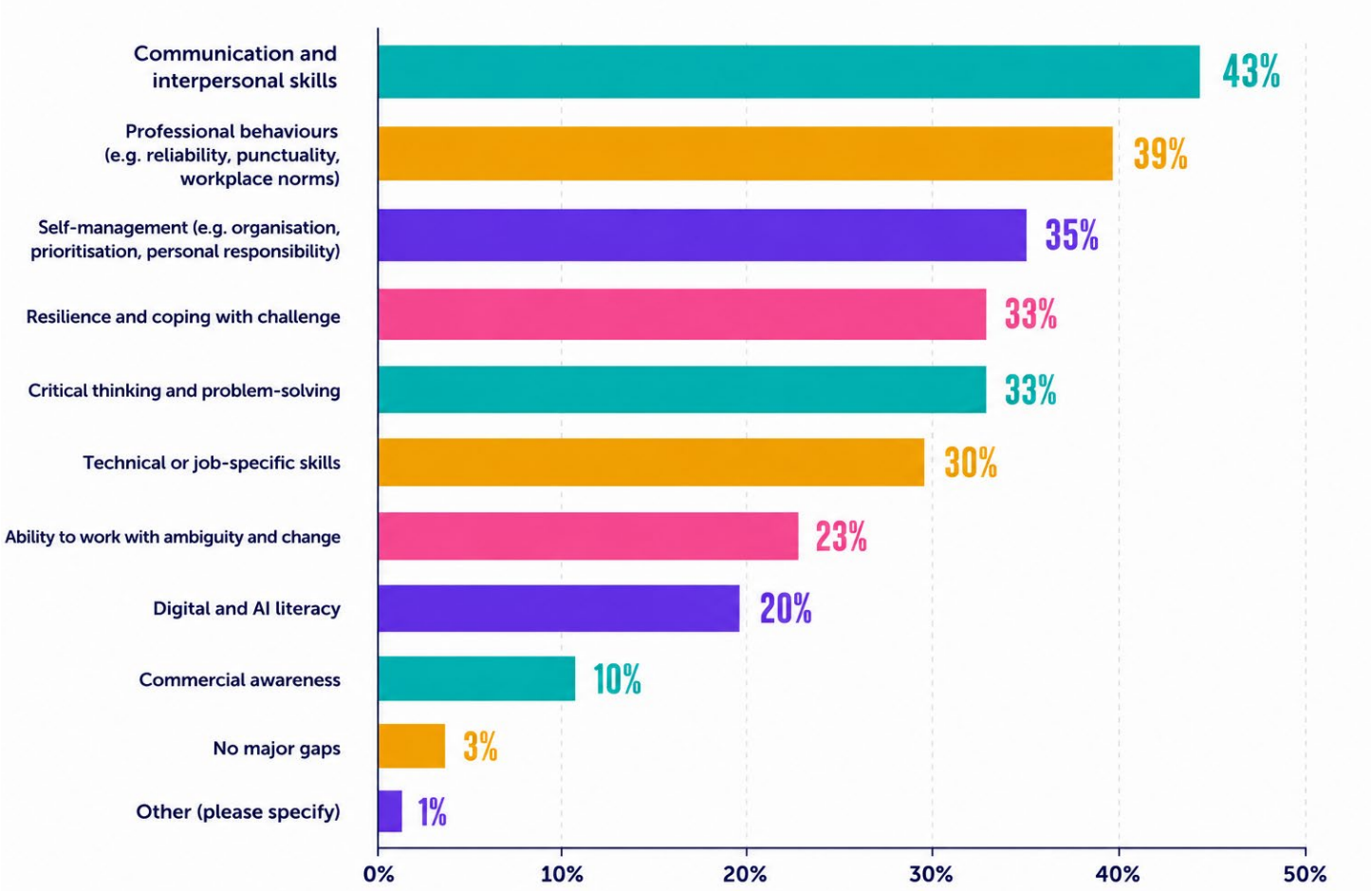
5. Ethical awareness and governance

Notably, only one of these five areas relates directly to technical capability. The remainder are transferable capabilities that enable people to apply technical knowledge effectively in changing contexts.

Our survey findings reinforce this picture. When asked where they see the biggest skill and behaviour gaps among early career entrants, employers were most likely to identify communication and interpersonal skills (43%), professional behaviours (39%), self-management (35%), resilience (33%) and critical thinking and problem-solving (33%). By contrast, technical or job-specific skills (30%) and digital and AI literacy (20%) ranked considerably lower.

BIGGEST SKILL OR BEHAVIOUR GAPS AMONG EARLY CAREER ENTRANTS

Responses: 496



However, this growing emphasis on durable capabilities should not be interpreted as evidence that young people lack technical capability. As Nichola Hay MBE, Director of Apprenticeship Strategy and Policy at BPP and Board Member of Skills England, observes, many young people have technology "at their fingertips" and may possess stronger digital capabilities than employers sometimes assume. This may be particularly true for some neurodiverse young people, who can demonstrate significant strengths in areas such as AI, data and technology while requiring additional support to develop interpersonal or workplace capabilities. The challenge for employers may therefore be not only developing capability but recognising and making effective use of capability that already exists.

City & Guilds supports learners in gaining both technical, job-specific capabilities and "durable skills" - transferable capabilities that are valuable across roles, sectors and career stages. In practice, this approach combines a technical spine of vocational qualifications in sectors such as construction, electrical installation, plumbing and hospitality with transversal skills, including leadership qualifications from Level 2 to Level 7 and wider employability modules. The objective is to develop applied technical and human capabilities in parallel, recognising that both are increasingly important in a labour market characterised by continual technological change.

This creates a different challenge for employers. Rather than predicting the next technical skill, organisations increasingly need to develop people who can continue learning as work evolves.

1.4 THE WAYS YOUNG PEOPLE ACQUIRE SKILLS MUST ADAPT

"What we face is not a lack of clarity about what employers want. It is a gap in how these capabilities are developed and evidenced. At BPP, we develop our early careers learners around core human workplace skills that underpin success across roles, spanning cognitive, interpersonal and adaptive capabilities, and emerging skills that are becoming increasingly important: artificial intelligence, sustainability mindset, and cyber responsibility. The gaps employers are identifying map directly to these areas. They are not primarily technical. They sit in communication, collaboration, problem-solving, resilience, self-management and judgment. As AI takes on more routine cognitive work, these capabilities become the differentiator, both in hiring decisions and in long-term performance." **- Emma O'Dell, Skills and Capability Director, BPP**

Many of the capabilities employers increasingly value, including communication, judgment, resilience and adaptability, are developed primarily through experience rather than formal instruction. As a result, understanding how these capabilities are developed is becoming just as important as identifying which capabilities organisations need.

Two environments are particularly important. The first concerns the experiences available to young people before they enter employment, which help prepare them for the realities of work.

AS NICHOLA HAY MBE OBSERVES:

"The challenge of helping young people transition successfully from education into employment is not new. That bridge between education and work has always existed. The difference is that we once had a stronger focus on supporting people across it."

The second concerns the workplace itself, where those capabilities have traditionally been reinforced and developed through everyday experience. Both environments are changing, making it harder for young people to acquire the capabilities employers increasingly value.

THE PRE-EMPLOYMENT GAP

Many of the developmental experiences that once helped prepare young people for work are becoming less common and less evenly distributed. The result is a growing pre-employment development gap between the capabilities employers value and the opportunities many young people have to develop them before entering work.

OECD's *The Importance and Benefits of Workplace Experience for Teenagers* make a compelling case for early exposure to work. Reviewing 27 studies across six countries, the OECD found positive associations between teenage work experience and later employment outcomes in 20 of them. Young people with workplace or volunteering experience were more likely to report confidence in dealing with unfamiliar situations, adapting to new circumstances, coping under pressure and navigating new environments. Importantly, many of these findings come from longitudinal studies that control for academic attainment, socio-economic background and personal characteristics, strengthening confidence that the relationships observed are not simply a reflection of pre-existing advantage.

These experiences are becoming increasingly important because employers are looking beyond educational attainment alone when assessing early career talent, placing greater emphasis on evidence that candidates can apply their capabilities in workplace settings. As Martin Birchall, Founder and Managing Director of High Fliers Research, observes:

The Value of Credentials as a Market Signal is Declining

As educational attainment has risen, traditional qualification signals have become less distinctive as indicators of capability. In the early 2000s, around one quarter of working-age adults held qualifications at Level 4 or above. Today, that figure is approaching one half. Recent analysis by the Office for Students reinforces this trend, finding that 40% of the increase in first-class degrees awarded in 2023–24 could not be explained by changes in student entry qualifications or demographic characteristics.

Together, these developments contribute to what some commentators describe as a "signal gap". Employers are not necessarily seeing weaker candidates than in the past, but they may be relying on signals that have become less reliable indicators of underlying capability. This may help explain why many employers are placing greater emphasis on evidence of durable capabilities alongside formal qualifications and technical skills.

> *"The story young people are told is straightforward: work hard to get your GCSEs, progress on to A-levels and then a university degree, and a good job will naturally follow. The difficulty is that the last step simply isn't true anymore. Doing well academically is important, but when employers are hiring, only about a fifth of what they're really looking for is your educational background. The other four fifths is everything else: whether you can show you understand the job you're applying for, whether you've built the skills and experience to do it, and whether there's a genuine fit between you and the role."*

The challenge is that access to these experiences is becoming less even and, for some, increasingly limited. The 2025 Youth Voice Census, based on the experiences of more than 8,000 young people across the UK, found that only 26% had accessed work experience in the previous 12 months, while one third had participated in none of the wider developmental opportunities surveyed.

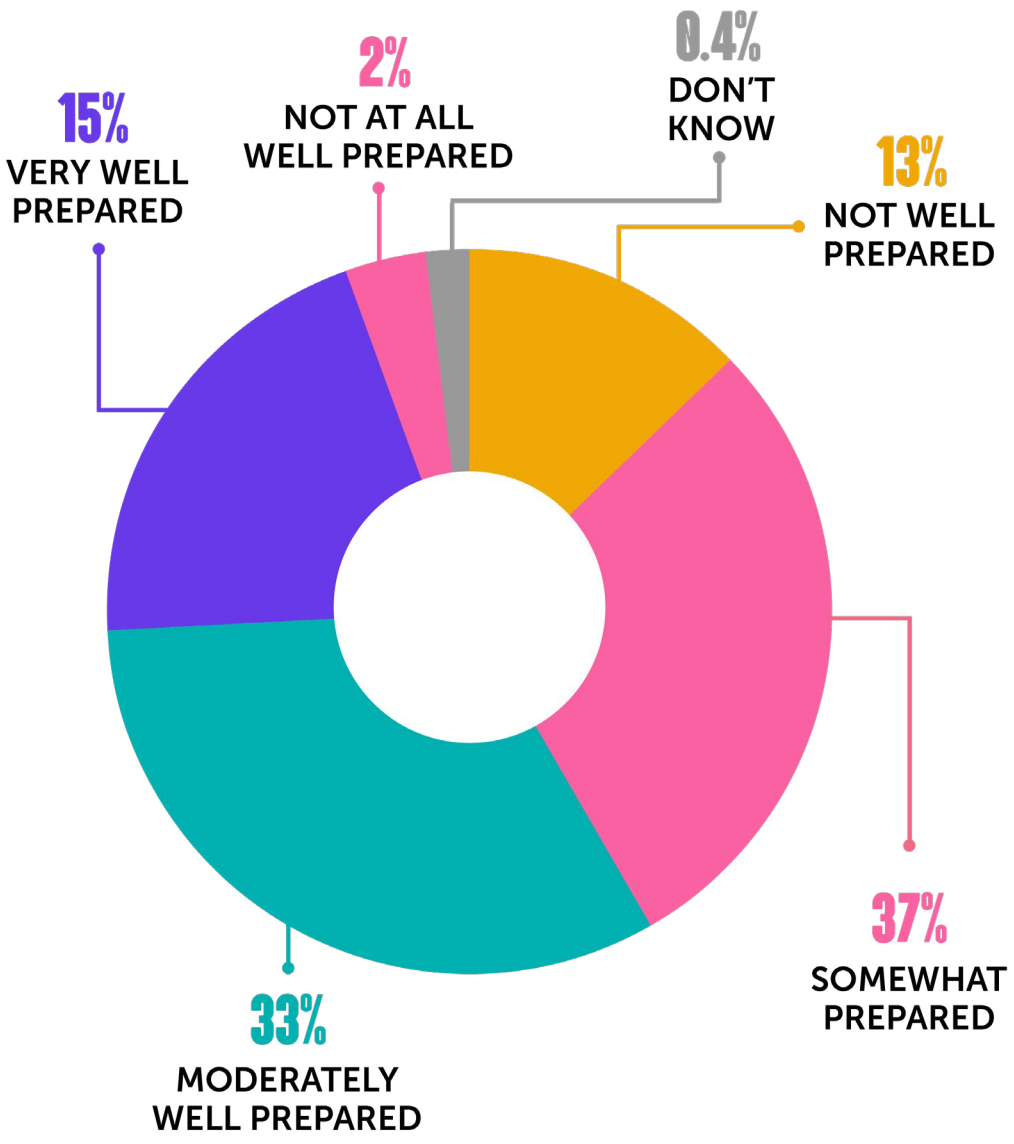
As Laura-Jane Rawlings MBE DL FCGI FIEP, Chief Executive Officer, Youth Employment UK, observes, the consequences of this lack of exposure extend beyond capability development itself. It can create barriers long before a young person reaches an interview or assessment centre. Employers often describe opportunities using terms such as "excellent communication skills" or "fast-paced environment" that appear self-explanatory but assume a degree of familiarity with workplace norms. For young people with limited exposure to work, this language can be unclear, difficult to interpret or even discouraging. Employers may therefore need to move beyond simply recycling recruitment materials and consider whether the language they use is accessible to the young people they are trying to attract. More fundamentally, if employers are not creating work experience or introducing young people to the world of work, "who do they think is?".

Employers appear to be experiencing the consequences of this gap. In our survey, around seven in ten employers (70%) reported that early career entrants are only somewhat (37%) or moderately (33%) prepared to perform their immediate role when they join the organisation. Just 15% considered entrants to be very well prepared.

BPP's March 2026 research provides further insight into the nature of this challenge. Among employers, the leading issue in preparing university leavers for success is a lack of workplace readiness and professional behaviours (40%), followed by low confidence and the need for stronger self-management skills (36%). Gaps in core or foundational competencies, including communication and teamwork, were also identified by 34% of employers.

HOW WELL-PREPARED EARLY CAREER ENTRANTS ARE TO PERFORM THEIR IMMEDIATE ROLE WHEN THEY START EMPLOYMENT

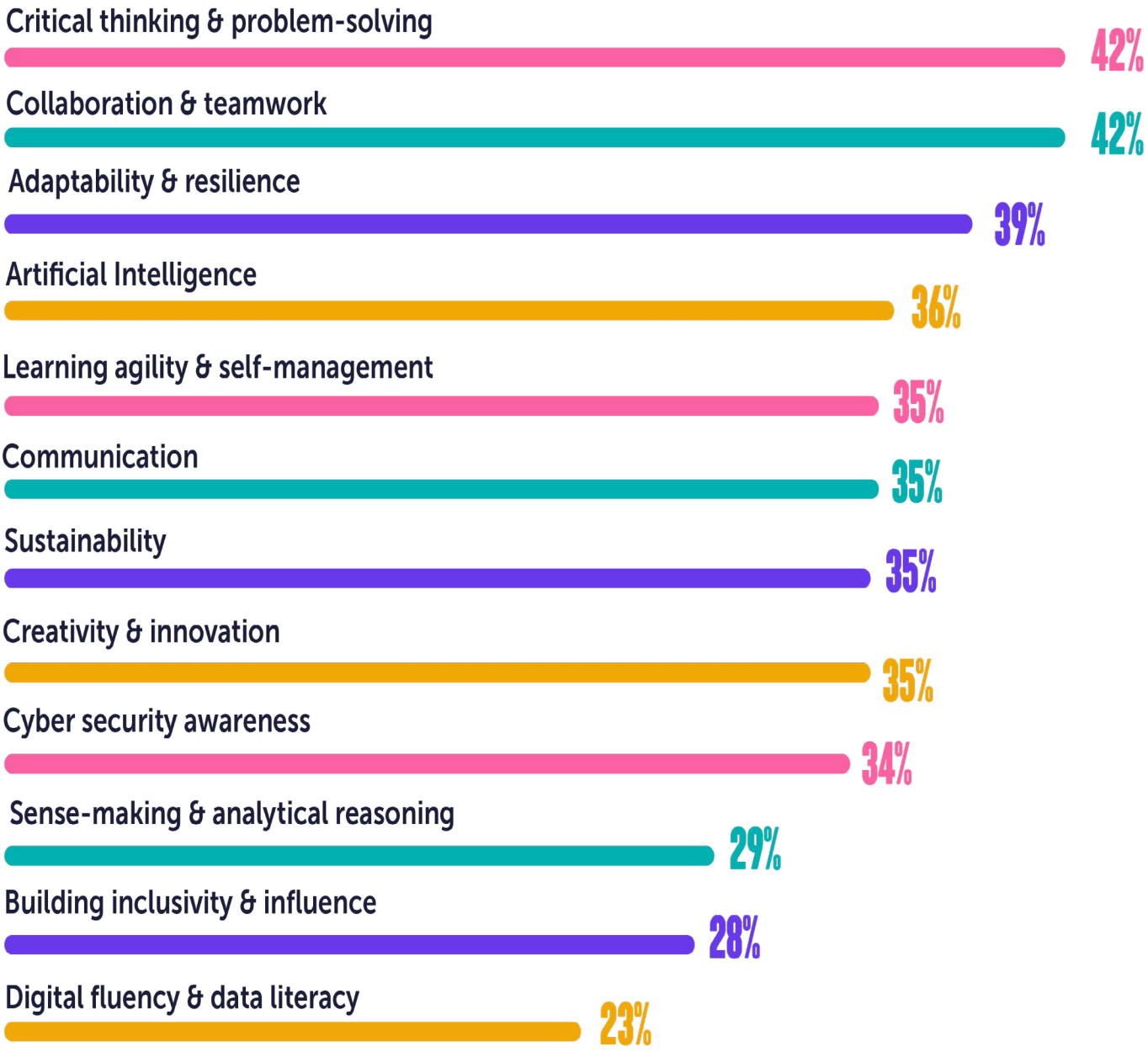
Responses: 496



SOURCE: BPP

The same pattern is reflected during recruitment. Employers report that the capabilities they find hardest to assess are those most often developed through experience rather than technical knowledge. Critical thinking and problem-solving, and collaboration and teamwork, are the skills employers find most difficult to assess during selection (both 42%), followed by adaptability and resilience (39%). Learning agility and self-management, communication, creativity and innovation are each cited by 35% of employers. In chapter 3 we look at how employers are tackling this challenge in practice.

CAPABILITIES EMPLOYERS FIND MOST DIFFICULT TO ASSESS DURING RECRUITMENT



SOURCE: BPP

However, early career entrants may assess their own capabilities with a different perspective. As Sarah Roché, Cibyl & Advisory Practice Lead at GTI, explains:

> *"What our 2026 student data (100,000 UK school leavers and graduates) consistently shows is that students feel confident in the capabilities they bring. Skills like problem-solving (58%), critical thinking (50%) and teamwork (50%) are strongly self-reported, alongside communication (48%) and attention to detail (45%). These are the same areas employers highlight as gaps. The disconnect is not necessarily about what skills exist, but how those skills are developed, evidenced and translated into the workplace context."*

In other words, the challenge is not simply whether young people possess these capabilities, but whether they have had sufficient opportunities to develop, demonstrate and apply them in workplace settings before entering employment.

This perspective also has implications for how employers think about work readiness. If workplace capability develops through experience rather than existing fully formed on entry, organisations may need to view early careers programmes less as a means of recruiting fully work-ready individuals and more as a mechanism for supporting the transition from education into employment. As Richard Hamer, Education Director at BAE Systems, puts it:

> *"The whole point of a graduate or apprenticeship programme is to support that journey from education to being in work. We need to be careful not to have unrealistic expectations about people coming in fresh from education and being already fully competent and work ready."*

Supporting successful transitions is important not only for employers, but for young people themselves. The 2026 Milburn Review found that each year spent not in education, employment or training (NEET) is associated with an estimated lifetime earnings loss of around £52,000, rising to almost £293,000 for individuals who remain disengaged between the ages of 18 and 24. The review also found that prescriptions for anxiety and depression are around 50% higher in the 10 to 20 years following a period of NEET status. While the causes of disengagement are complex, these findings illustrate the long-term personal, economic and societal consequences that can arise when young people become detached from education, work and wider developmental opportunities.

CERN offers a useful example of how organisations can address this challenge in practice. As Lore Taillieu, Head of Talent Acquisition, explains, its Early Career graduate placement programme is built around the principle of a "transparent sell", making expectations explicit for both the recent graduates and supervisors. Participants are told they will carry out real work, gain meaningful experience and build their CV in an international environment, but are also made aware that the programme does not guarantee a permanent role. Equally, supervisors are reminded that early career graduates are not simply a source of cheap labour, but an investment that requires training, support and time before delivering a return. By making this employer–participant bargain explicit from the outset, CERN increases the likelihood that both graduates and the employer will benefit from the experience.

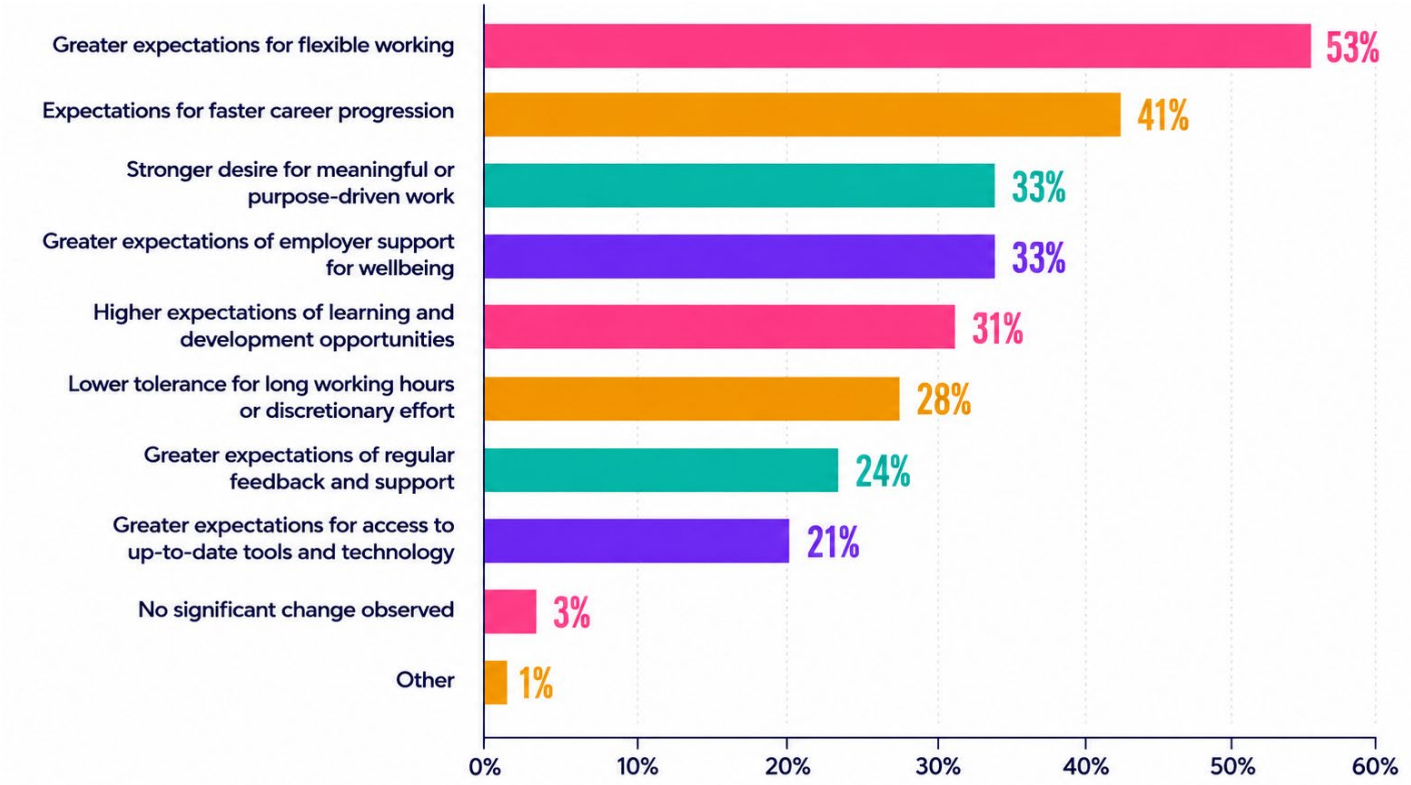
THE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT

Whereas the previous section explored how opportunities to develop capability before employment have become less consistent, changes within the workplace itself are also altering how capability develops after people join organisations.

One of the most significant shifts identified by employers is the growth of flexible working. When asked about the biggest changes in the expectations of early career hires compared with three to five years ago, greater demand for flexibility was the most commonly cited response, identified by more than half of employers. This reflects broader changes in working patterns: ONS data show that 28% of working adults were in hybrid arrangements in 2025, rising to 41% among degree-qualified workers.

CHANGES IN EXPECTATIONS OF EARLY CAREER HIRES COMPARED TO 3-5 YEARS AGO

Responses: 496



The development challenge this creates is less about policy than practice. As Charlie Ball, Head of Labour Market Intelligence at Jisc, argues:

> *"Many organisations have adapted their flexible working arrangements faster than they have adapted the development practices that support early career talent within them. Hybrid working requires a set of capabilities from both workers and organisations, and employers are still working out the onboarding, training, performance management and development in that context."*

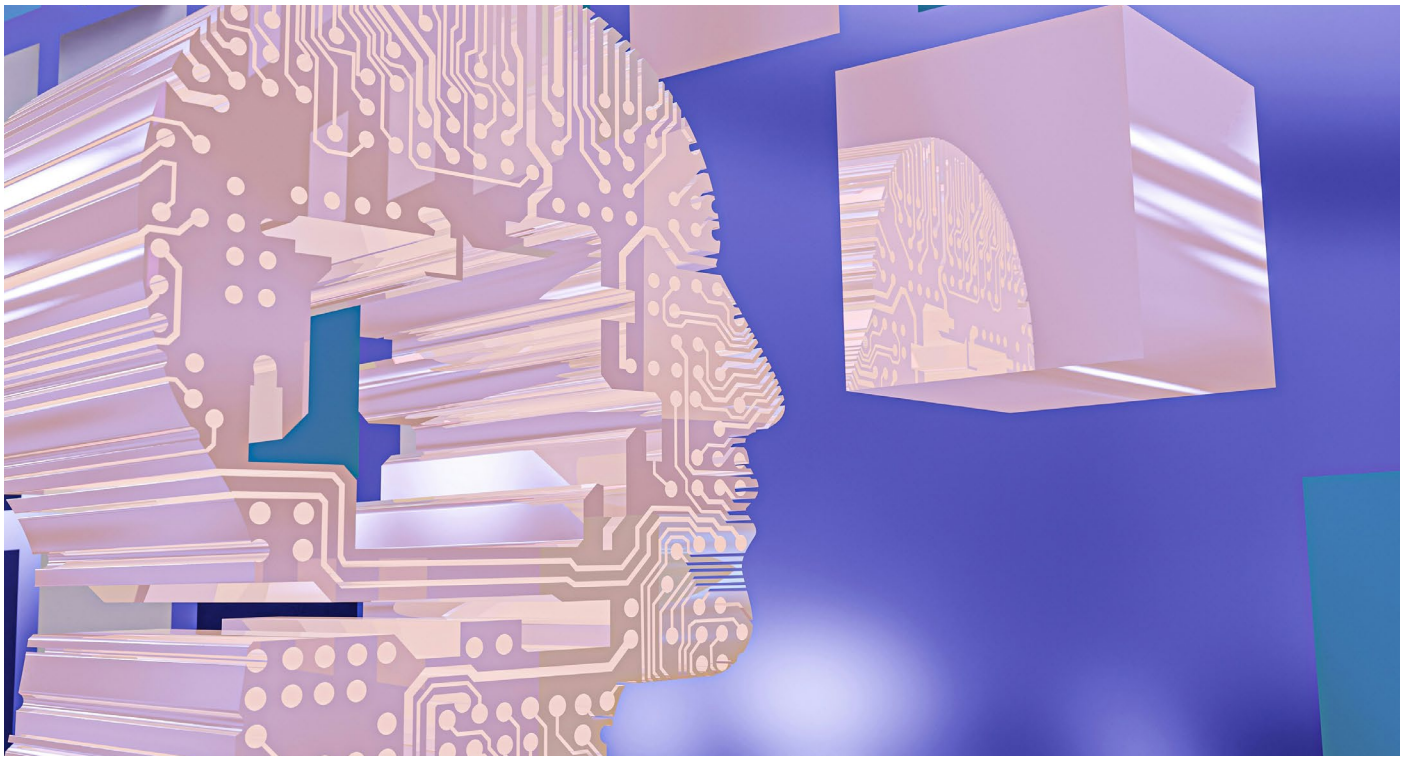
Historically, organisations could assume that new hires would observe experienced colleagues, absorb workplace norms through everyday interaction and build networks through physical proximity. In more flexible environments, fewer of those processes happen naturally. Capability development becomes less a by-product of work and more something organisations need to design deliberately.

WEAKER JUNIOR HIRING MAY BE DRIVEN MORE BY WORKING FROM HOME THAN BY AI.

It may be premature to attribute weaker junior hiring simply to AI. Lambert and Schindler (2026) argue that working from home may play a larger role. Their analysis of new hire and job posting data across the US, UK, Canada and Australia found that when AI and working-from-home exposure were estimated separately, both predicted a fall in the junior share of hiring. However, when estimated together, the working-from-home effect remained while the AI effect weakened sharply. This suggests that changes in working patterns may be a more important factor in weaker junior hiring than AI alone.

Evidence suggests many are already moving in that direction. The 2026 ISE *Student Development Survey* found that around two-thirds of development activity was delivered face-to-face, while 72% of employers identified face-to-face learning as the highest-quality approach, up from 47% in 2024. As Claire Tyler, Head of Insights at ISE, explains:

> *"During the pandemic, many employers shifted much of their early careers development online, but research showed it was often seen as less impactful. In response, delivery has been rebalancing in recent years, reflecting growing recognition that some aspects of learning, development and professional socialisation work better in person."*



Young people also value hybrid working but the benefit of office attendance. The Prospects Early Careers Survey (2024) found that 60% of graduates preferred hybrid working but associated workplace attendance more strongly with collaboration, team cohesion and managerial support.

The challenge for employers is therefore not choosing between flexibility and capability development but designing working arrangements that enable both.

These developments suggest that workforce capability is increasingly shaped by the opportunities people have to develop and demonstrate capabilities before and during employment, rather than something employers can simply recruit. As a result, employers are becoming active participants in how capability is developed, not simply how it is identified and selected. This theme is explored further in Chapter 2.



CHAPTER 2

JOINING UP THE EARLY CAREERS SYSTEM - EMPLOYERS, GOVERNMENT AND EDUCATION

> *"Creating future workforce capability depends on a genuine triangular relationship between government, education and business. Each plays a distinct role, but only by working together can they create the conditions and experiences that prepare young people for work."* - **Georgina Huntley, People and Culture Director, ManpowerGroup UK**

Historically, employers have largely interacted with the skills system by articulating the capabilities they require and recruiting from the available talent pool. However, the evidence presented throughout this report suggests that this model is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Many of the capabilities employers now value most are developed through experiences that extend beyond formal education, while the environments through which those capabilities have traditionally been acquired are becoming less reliable. Employers can therefore no longer assume that the wider system will consistently produce work-ready talent, nor can they create those capabilities alone.

Addressing this challenge requires a fundamental shift in the role employers play within the skills system: from consumers of talent to active participants in shaping how future workforce capability is developed. As James Robson, Director of SKOPE and Associate Professor in Tertiary Education Systems at the University of Oxford, explains:

> *"We need to move beyond a skills system where employers simply specify the capabilities they need and recruit from the available talent pool. Instead, employers need to work alongside education providers, policymakers and others to shape the conditions through which future workforce capability is developed."*

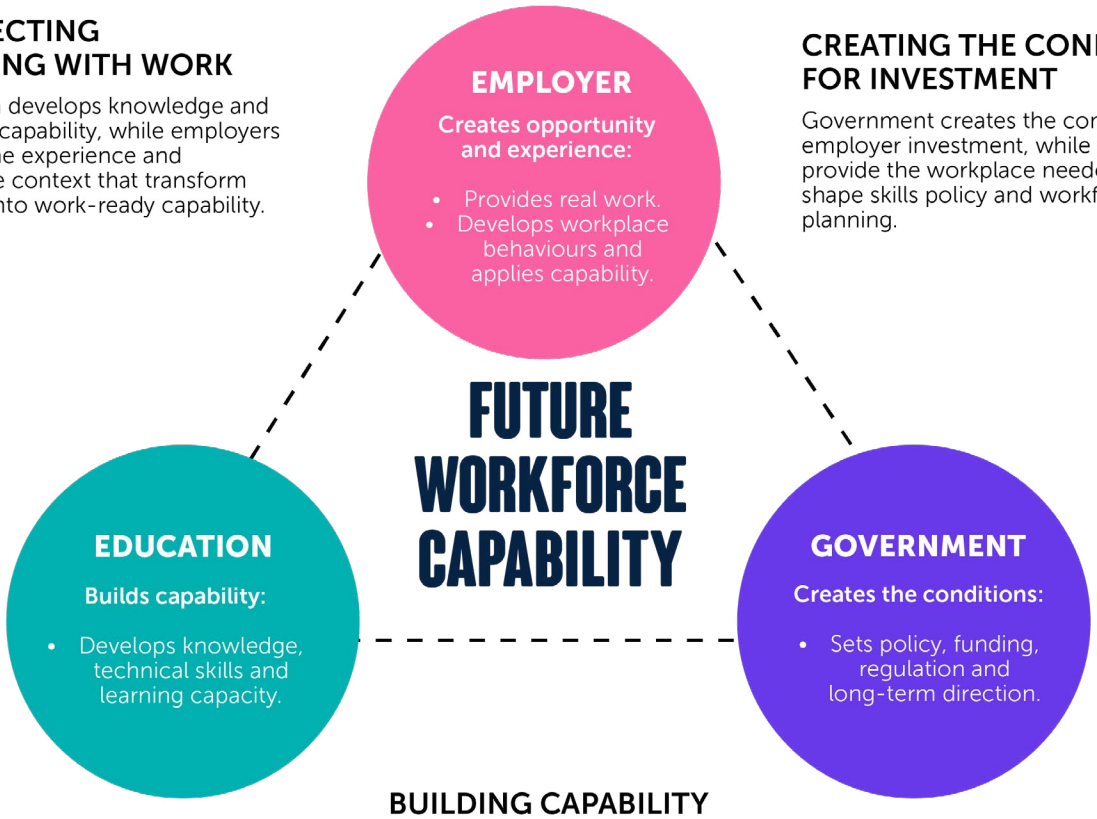
If employers are to become more active participants in shaping workforce capability, it is first important to understand the distinct role each part of the system plays. Capability is not created by a single institution or at a single point in time. Rather, it develops through the interaction of government, education providers, employers and young people themselves, each contributing in different but complementary ways.

CONNECTING LEARNING WITH WORK

Education develops knowledge and technical capability, while employers provide the experience and workplace context that transform learning into work-ready capability.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR INVESTMENT

Government creates the conditions for employer investment, while employers provide the workplace needed to shape skills policy and workforce planning.



BUILDING CAPABILITY

Government creates the policy, funding and regulatory framework that enables education to develop the knowledge, skills and qualifications needed for future workforce capability.

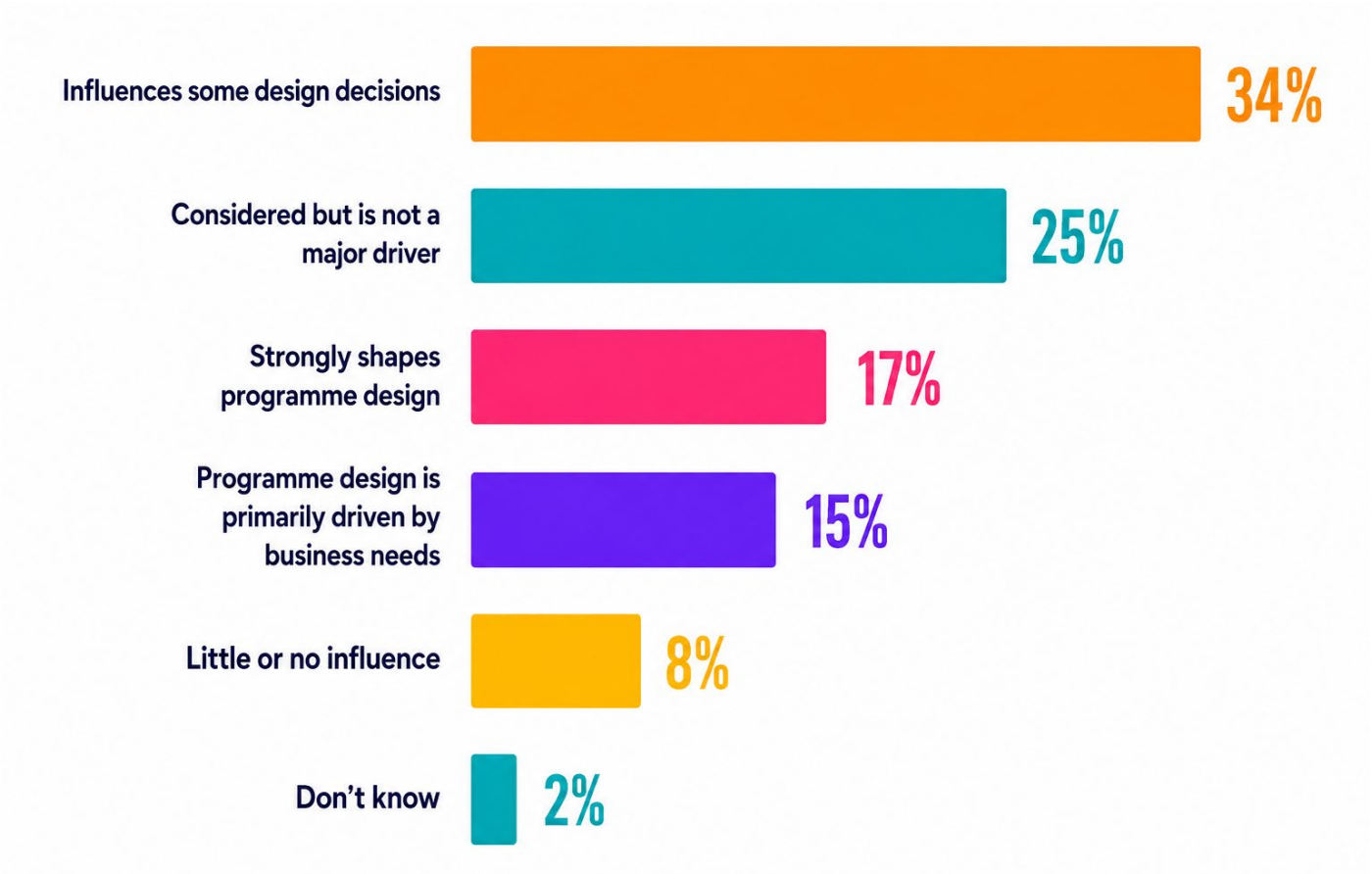
2.1 THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

While employers and education providers are responsible for developing capability directly, government shapes the wider environment in which those efforts take place. Funding arrangements, regulation, incentives, policy coordination and long-term strategic direction all influence how effectively organisations can invest in early careers and collaborate across the wider skills system. Its role is therefore not to develop capability itself, but to create the conditions that enable others to do so.

Our survey findings highlight the extent to which government shapes the wider early careers system. More than half of employers (51%) reported that government policy or funding either strongly shapes or influences the design of their early careers programmes, while fewer than one quarter said their programmes are driven primarily by business need with little or no policy influence.

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES GOVERMENT POLICY OF FUNDING INFLUENCE HOW YOUR ORGANISATION DESIGNS ITS EARLY CAREERS PROGRAMMES?

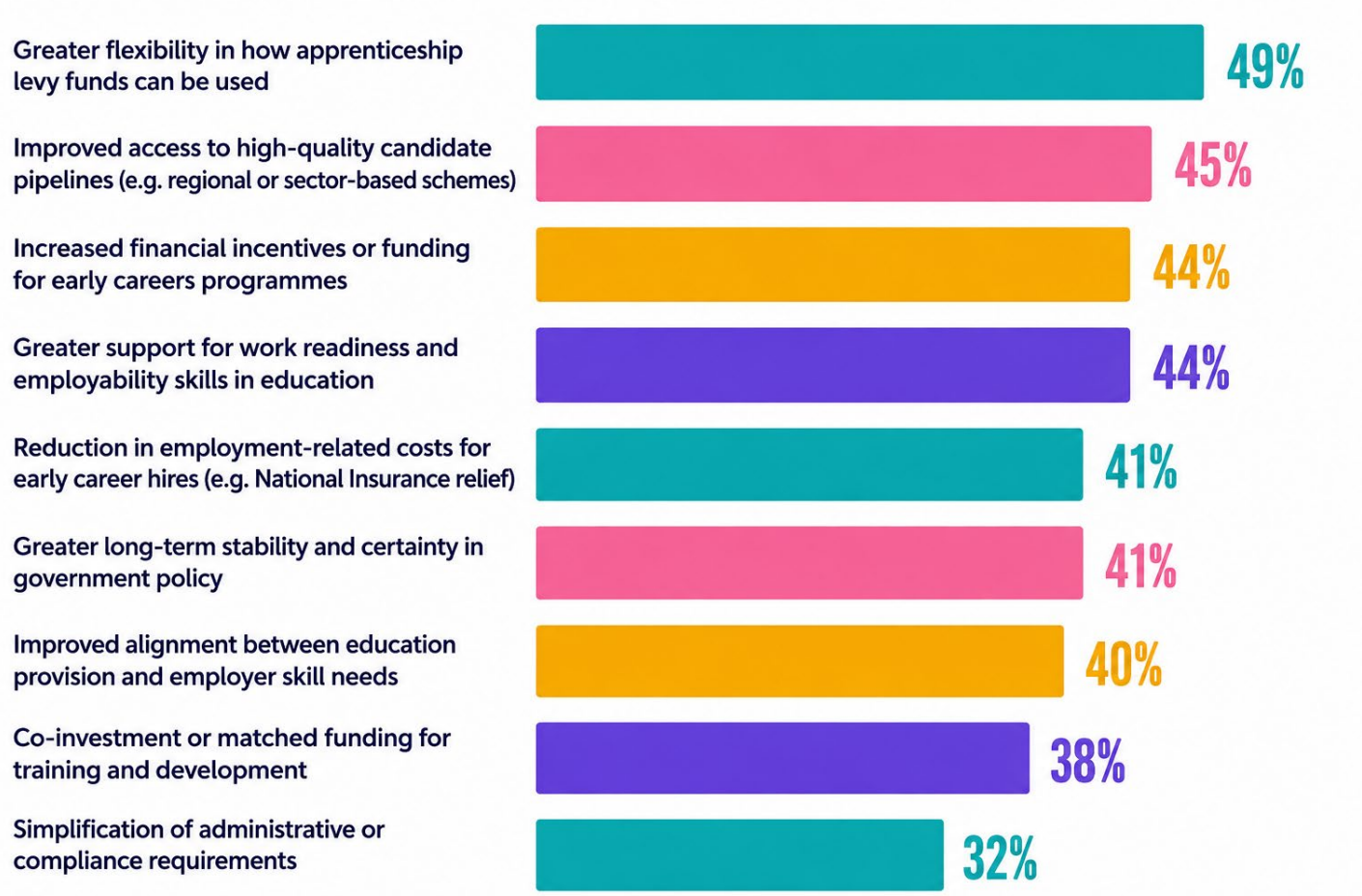
Responses: 485



Employers, however, increasingly see government's role as extending beyond funding individual programmes. While financial incentives remain important, respondents consistently prioritised measures that would strengthen the wider system through which workforce capability is developed, including greater flexibility in apprenticeship funding, stronger candidate pipelines, improved work readiness, better alignment between education and employer needs, and greater policy certainty.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS MOST LIKELY TO ENCOURAGE GREATER INVESTMENT IN EARLY CAREERS

Responses: 485



Collectively, these findings suggest employers increasingly see government's role as extending beyond financial support. Rather than simply funding individual programmes, they are looking to government to create a more stable, coordinated and responsive skills system that enables long-term investment in workforce capability.

Government funding is clearly shaping the types of programmes employers offer and the scale at which they recruit early career talent. However, funded routes sit within a wider set of talent pathways, rather than defining them. Employers still need to make deliberate investment decisions beyond what is covered by mechanisms such as the Growth and Skills Levy, whether through unfunded programmes, additional development activity, or broader entry routes. This mix is important. It signals long-term commitment to building capability, ensures access to a wider talent pool, and allows organisations to design pathways based on workforce need rather than funding availability alone.

> *"Frequent changes of policy make it hard to plan long term in this space."* - CRF Research Interviewee

SKILLS ENGLAND: BUILDING A MORE COORDINATED SKILLS SYSTEM

On one level, the establishment of Skills England in 2024 represents a national recognition of this evolving role. Rather than focusing solely on funding individual programmes, it reflects a broader ambition to create a more joined-up skills system, improving coordination between government, education providers and employers, strengthening alignment between education and labour market needs, and providing a more coherent approach to workforce planning, including how young people move from education into work and how early career pathways are structured.

Central to this is Skills England's ambition to act as the authoritative voice on skills in England: using data, labour market intelligence and sector insight to horizon scan future skills needs, identify emerging gaps and inform policy and provision accordingly. Its sector skills needs assessments, covering 150 occupations across the Industrial Strategy's priority sectors plus health and social care and construction, project demand for those roles growing by around 1.8 million by 2035, a 24% increase from 2025 levels. These assessments also highlight a persistent gap at Levels 4 and 5, where too few people hold higher technical qualifications sitting below degree level. Together, they are intended to give the wider system a concrete, evidence-based foundation for aligning qualification reform, funded provision and employer investment.

For early careers, this matters because it begins to define where entry-level roles are likely to grow, which pathways need to expand, and where transitions into work are currently weakest. The gap at Levels 4 and 5 is particularly relevant here, as these qualifications often sit at the point between education and sustained employment, and remain underused as structured early career entry routes.

However, translating that ambition into practice is proving difficult. This is particularly visible in the context of early careers and youth employment, where system coordination needs to translate into clear, accessible routes into work rather than remaining at the level of insight and intent.

THE CHALLENGE FOR SKILLS ENGLAND IS TO COORDINATE A SYSTEM IN WHICH IT MUST:

Depend on employers articulating future skills needs that many are not yet equipped to define.
Skills England's model relies on employers identifying the capabilities they require so that education provision, qualifications and policy can be aligned accordingly. Its Analysis and Insights Unit conducts horizon scanning across sectors, examining how AI and other forces are reshaping roles and shifting skills requirements, and does not rely solely on employers to define what the future will look like. In practice, however, many employers can identify broad themes such as AI, data or project management but struggle to translate these into specific skills, occupations, learning requirements or entry-level roles. This applies to today's roles, not just future ones. As a result, Skills England often lacks the detailed intelligence needed to align education and training effectively with labour market demand.

More fundamentally, many organisations lack mature workforce planning, making it difficult to anticipate future capability needs or understand how technology is reshaping roles. This creates a direct challenge for early careers, where the design of roles, progression and development pathways needs to be explicit. As a result, matching the intelligence Skills England is developing at the system level with the granular, employer-level demand needed to align education and training effectively remains a work in progress. A more coordinated skills system only improves outcomes if it results in clearer pathways into work, better alignment between education and entry-level roles, and more deliberate design of how capability is built in the first years of employment. Without that, the system becomes more informed, but not necessarily more accessible for the individuals it is intended to serve.

Coordinate a system that remains fragmented.
Responsibility for skills has historically been spread across government departments, education providers, local institutions, sector bodies and employers with differing levels of capability and engagement. Employer representation is similarly uneven, while common skills taxonomies and workforce intelligence are still emerging rather than fully embedded. Consequently, the challenge is not simply creating a coordinating body, but coordinating a system whose institutions, data and decision-making processes are themselves only partially aligned.

Develop the delivery infrastructure to match its ambition.
Its employer engagement networks, expert groups and feedback mechanisms are still being established, while many organisations remain unclear about how to engage with Skills England or what practical value it offers. As a result, its ambitions around horizon scanning, co-creation and making the skills system work more effectively for employers have yet to translate into a consistently visible employer proposition across most sectors, outside a few more advanced areas such as financial services. The challenge therefore appears to be one of implementation rather than intent: the strategic direction is widely understood, but the infrastructure, relationships and employer confidence needed to deliver it remain under development.

Ultimately, a more coordinated skills system will depend not simply on a stronger central institution, but on a different relationship between government and employers: one in which employers, individually and through their representative bodies, move beyond articulating broad skills needs to become active partners in workforce planning and skills definition, within a clear strategic and funding framework set by government. Achieving this will require both sides to work together in more structured and intentional ways, underpinned by shared data.

WHY FINANCIAL INCENTIVES ALONE ARE UNLIKELY TO TRANSFORM YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

The expansion of financial incentives demonstrates a growing recognition that employers need greater support to invest in young people. As shown in the table below, the UK government has introduced, or announced, a range of financial measures targeted at different employers and stages of the recruitment process, from reducing wage and training costs to increasing flexibility in skills investment.

GOVERNMENT INCENTIVE	WHAT IT PROVIDES	TARGET EMPLOYERS	STATUS (JUNE 2026)
National Insurance relief for apprentices under 25	Employers do not pay employer National Insurance contributions for eligible apprentices under 25 earning below the upper secondary threshold.	All employers	Existing
Youth Jobs Grant	£3,000 payment for employing an 18–24-year-old who has claimed Universal Credit for six months or more, helping offset recruitment and training costs.	All employers	Live
National Jobs Guarantee	Government-funded six-month placements for eligible young people, covering wages (up to 25 hours per week at the National Minimum/Living Wage), employer National Insurance and minimum pension contributions.	All employers in participating areas	Piloting, with national expansion planned for Autumn 2026
100% funding of apprentice-ship training costs for SMEs	Removes the employer co-investment requirement for apprentices under 25, with government funding 100% of eligible training costs.	Non-levy paying SMEs	From August 2026
SME Apprenticeship Incentive	£2,000 payment for SMEs recruiting an apprentice aged 16–24.	Non-levy paying SMEs	From October 2026
Growth & Skills Levy reforms	Greater flexibility in how levy funds can be used through measures such as Apprenticeship Units and Foundation Apprenticeships, allowing employers to invest in shorter, more flexible training aligned to workforce needs.	Levy-paying employers	Phased introduction from late 2026

However, financial incentives alone are unlikely to deliver the scale of change policymakers are seeking, for various reasons:

A one-size fits-all incentive risks suiting none.

Incentives that are meaningful to small and medium-sized employers (hiring grants of £2000, for example) are relatively small when set against the overall costs of hiring and developing early career talent for larger employers. Interviewees from larger companies told us that more substantial fiscal levers, such as employer National Insurance or changes to the minimum wage, were more consequential.

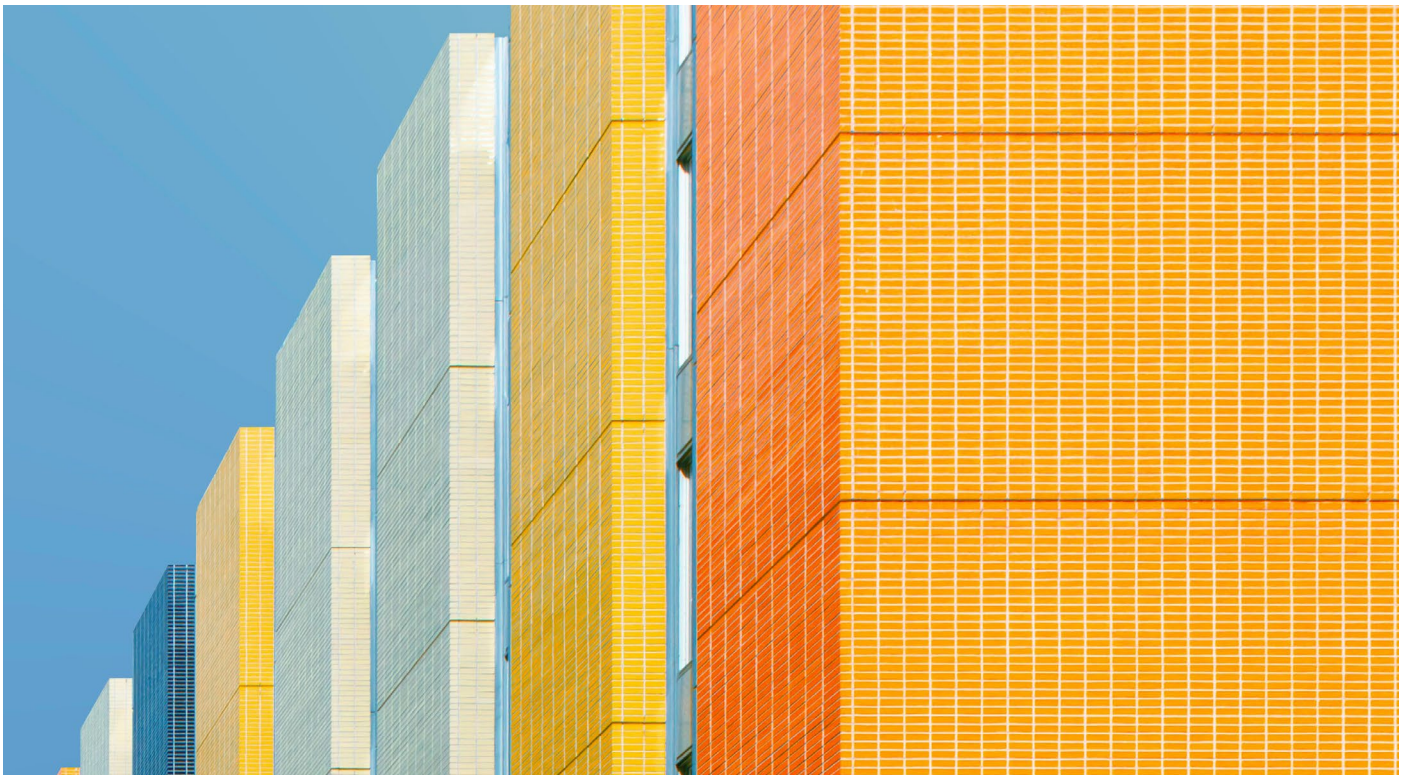
Reducing recruitment costs does not address the structural barriers to hiring young people

such as lack of work readiness or high demand for places, which are described throughout this report.

Employers' recruitment decisions are driven more by longer-term talent needs than short-term financial incentives

which become an additional consideration rather than the primary driver of behaviour, making it unlikely that current measures alone will generate the scale of recruitment policymakers are seeking.

Financial incentives are therefore most effective when they reinforce an existing workforce strategy rather than substitute for one, meaning that expanding youth employment at scale depends as much on workforce planning and job design as on increasing financial support.



2.2 THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Education builds the foundations on which future workforce capability is developed. It equips young people with knowledge, technical expertise and many of the transferable skills needed to begin their careers, while helping them develop the capacity to learn and adapt throughout working life. However, education cannot replicate every aspect of the workplace. Developing professional judgment, workplace behaviours and practical experience increasingly depend on experience in real working environments.

Our survey suggests employers hold mixed views about how effectively the education system prepares young people for work. Around four in ten agree that young people are well prepared for today's workplace, while just over one-third disagree. Rather than pointing to universal failure, these findings suggest that the challenge is one of consistency. They also reinforce that preparing young people for employment cannot rest with education alone but depends on how effectively learning is connected to the realities of work.

ONLY 41%

AGREE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE WELL PREPARED FOR TODAY'S WORKPLACE

Our research suggests three principles should underpin the relationship between education and employers:



Education and employers should jointly design pathways into work, not operate as separate stages of the journey.

Rather than education preparing young people in isolation before employers recruit them, employers should become active partners in shaping vocational programmes, contributing to curriculum design, workplace learning and assessment so that learning better reflects the realities of work.



Workplace experience should become an integral part of education rather than an optional addition.

Many of the capabilities employers value most, including professional judgment, workplace behaviours and commercial awareness are developed most effectively through work experience, internships and placements. These should be embedded within education pathways rather than treated as peripheral opportunities..



Employer engagement with education should become more strategic and long term.

Employers should build sustained partnerships with schools, colleges independent training providers and universities, investing in relationships, designing opportunities around future capability needs and treating early exposure to work as part of long-term workforce development rather than short-term recruitment.

NATWEST: BUILDING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH EDUCATION

NatWest has established a dedicated academic partnerships function that bridges education and employment by aligning relationships with universities, apprenticeship providers and government to the bank's long-term workforce strategy. Rather than simply recruiting graduates, the team works to improve work readiness, curriculum relevance and students' exposure to real business challenges, while helping NatWest build a stronger, more diverse pipeline of future talent.

This partnership is brought to life through initiatives such as hackathons in both the UK and India, where students tackle live business challenges, including using AI to reduce fraud or improve services for different customer groups. These projects expose students to authentic workplace problems while generating fresh ideas for the business.

> *"We recognised there was more we could do to bridge education and corporate life by helping solve challenges on both sides. That's why we created a dedicated academic partnerships team."*
>
> **Ashley Clifford,**
> Global Head of Early Talent, People, NatWest

NatWest also works upstream to influence the wider skills system. Through participation in government forums, Trailblazer groups and close collaboration with apprenticeship providers, it helps shape apprenticeship standards, curriculum content and the skills and competencies expected of future entrants.

The bank is now exploring how to extend these partnerships further, recognising that even short periods of workplace experience can improve employability, strengthen work readiness and widen access to opportunities. This reflects a broader ambition to support social mobility by engaging with young people earlier in their transition from education into work.

SEVERN TRENT: CREATING WORKPLACE LEARNING THAT EDUCATION ALONE CANNOT PROVIDE

Severn Trent's Coventry Academy provides a fully controlled, experiential route from low or no prior qualifications into skilled operational roles. As an employer-provider regulated by Ofsted, Severn Trent runs its own apprenticeship schemes and has built a learning environment that closely mirrors the assets apprentices will work on in the field.

ACCORDING TO NEIL MORRISON, GROUP HR AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR,

> *"If people have had a difficult experience of education, they often don't want to learn in a traditional classroom. We teach them in a context where they can learn and succeed."*

The academy includes above-ground and underground water networks where apprentices can practise leak detection and repair safely, a river environment for learning about waste disposal and environmental impact, a house for customer-facing training and increasing use of integrate VR and AI-enabled simulations to recreate real operational scenarios. The aim is to combine classroom learning, technical theory and hands-on practice in one environment, meeting learners where they are rather than relying solely on traditional academic routes.

This model is particularly significant because Severn Trent does not exclude young people who lack GCSE English and Maths. Instead, it delivers functional skills in-house, helping apprentices build the literacy, numeracy and confidence needed to succeed in increasingly data-enabled operational roles.

2.3 THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS

Employers' contribution to the wider early careers system depends on both their strategic ambition and their organisational capacity. While large employers may have the scale, resources and relationships to shape qualifications, influence policy, support regional partnerships or act as anchor institutions, smaller employers may contribute more effectively through sector bodies, local partnerships or representative organisations. There is therefore no single model of employer engagement.

Before deciding how to engage with the wider early careers system, employers should first consider two questions: what role are we seeking to play, and what role are we realistically equipped to play? Understanding the distinction between strategic ambition and organisational capacity provides a useful starting point for determining where employers can make the greatest contribution.

WHAT ROLE DO WE WANT TO PLAY?

This means clarifying the strategic objectives they are seeking to achieve and the reasons why broader engagement with education, government or the wider skills ecosystem aligns with their organisational priorities.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

What are we ultimately trying to achieve?

Is our primary objective to strengthen our future talent pipeline, support wider business strategy, improve social mobility, or contribute to the development of the future workforce more broadly?

How does engagement align with our organisational identity?

In what ways does playing a broader role support our employer brand, organisational purpose, DEI ambitions, or reputation within the communities and markets in which we operate?

How much influence do we want to have beyond our own organisation?

Are we seeking simply to recruit talent, or do we also want to help shape education, influence policy, contribute to sector wide initiatives, or act as a regional anchor institution?

Where can we create the greatest long-term value?

Should our efforts focus primarily on our own workforce, our local communities, our sector, education or the wider skills system?

WHAT ROLE ARE WE EQUIPPED TO PLAY?

Organisations differ considerably in the resources, influence and infrastructure available to support broader engagement with the early careers system.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

What scale of influence do we have?

How large is our organisation, how many people do we recruit, and what is our geographical footprint? Are we well placed to influence local, regional or national skills agendas, or is our greatest impact likely to be on our own or through collective employer networks?

Do we have the organisational capability to deliver?

Do we have the capacity and expertise needed to build partnerships and engage effectively with education providers or policymakers and sustain our commitment?

What do we already have in place and where are the gaps in our connections to the wider ecosystem?

Do we already have trusted relationships with schools, colleges, universities, government, sector bodies or employer networks that enable us to contribute effectively beyond our own organisation?

Can the wider organisation support what we commit to?

Do line managers, operational teams and business leaders have the time, capability and willingness to provide work experience, mentoring, curriculum input and the wider support that meaningful engagement requires?

Only once employers have considered both questions should they determine how they engage with the wider early careers system. The objective is not for every organisation to play the same role, but for each to make the contribution that best reflects its strategic priorities, organisational capability and ability to create long-term value.

A critical contribution that employers can make to the wider system is to increase access to work experience for young people. McDonald's work experience programme demonstrates what can be done.

LAUNCHING THE UK'S LARGEST IN-PERSON WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME

As the UK's largest private employer of young people, McDonald's has consciously chosen to play a broader role in the UK's early careers ecosystem beyond simply recruiting its own workforce. Rather than viewing early careers solely as a mechanism for meeting its own workforce needs, it sees supporting young people's transition into work as part of its wider organisational purpose and contribution to society.

This strategic intent is reflected in the launch of what McDonald's describes as the UK's largest in-person work experience programme. From August 2026, the company will offer 2,500 paid work experience placements across 500 restaurants, with a particular focus on areas with high concentrations of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Participants gain practical workplace experience, employability skills and a guaranteed interview, helping address barriers that often prevent young people from entering work.

What makes the programme particularly distinctive is the rationale behind it. As James Thorne, Senior Vice President and Chief People Officer, explains, the business attracts large numbers of applicants for entry-level roles and sees first-hand what young people are capable of. The programme is therefore not designed to be a recruitment driver; rather, it is "genuinely about giving back to society", using the organisation's scale and reach to improve opportunities for young people while strengthening trust in the McDonald's brand.

In summary, none of the actors in the early careers system can succeed independently. Government, education and employers must collaborate to create opportunities through which people can gain access to learning and work opportunities.

The practical challenge for employers is to translate system-level shifts into strategies for developing and executing early careers strategies. The next chapter explores how employers can design and implement effective early careers programmes.



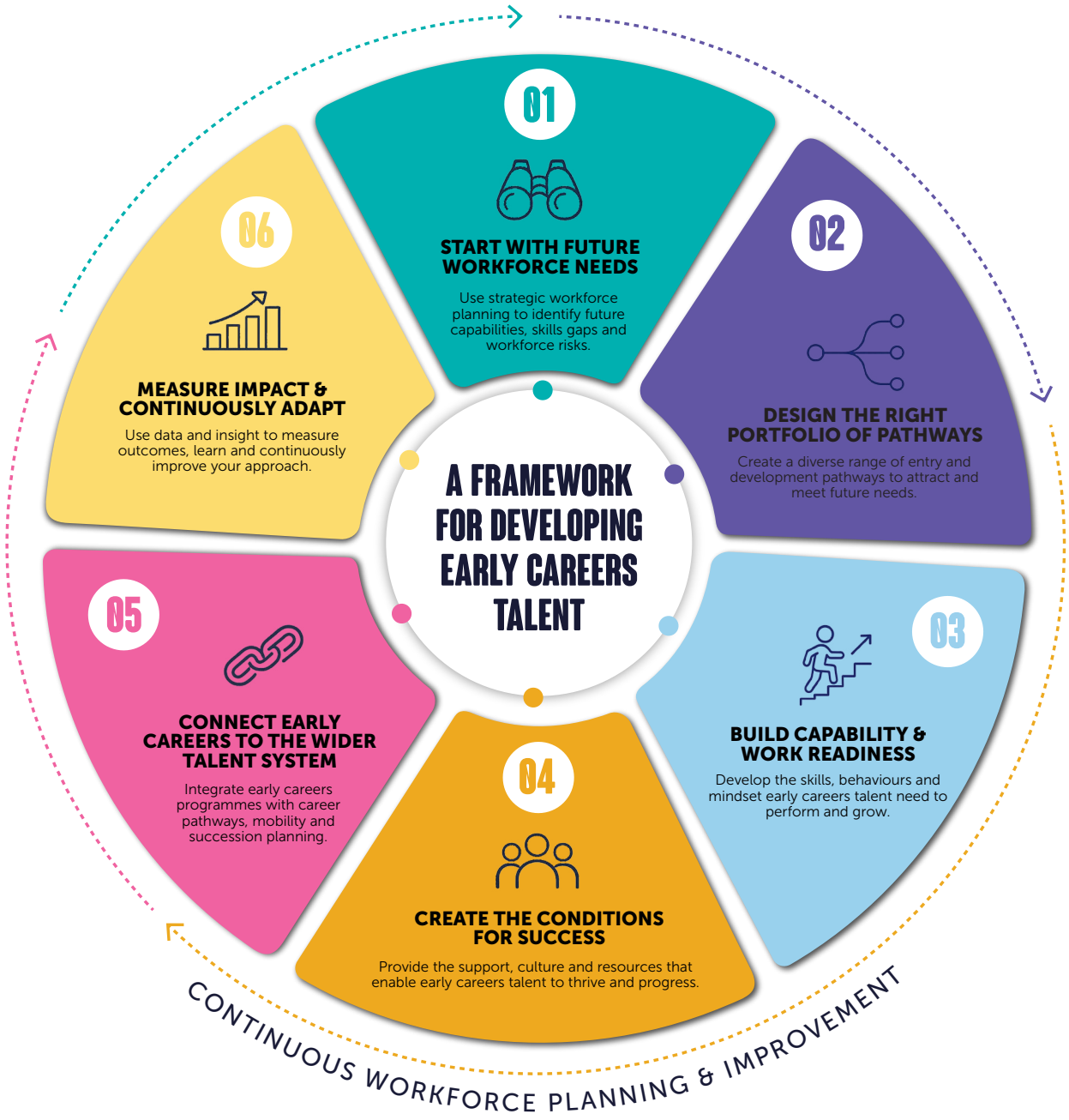
CHAPTER 3

CRF FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING EARLY CAREERS TALENT

Many organisations focus their early careers programmes on numbers of graduates and apprentices, recruitment campaigns and rotational programmes. However, the most effective organisations view early careers as a long-term talent system designed to address future workforce needs.

This chapter sets out a practical framework based on our research into how employers are redesigning early careers programmes in response to labour market changes, employability challenges and the impact of AI.

THE FRAMEWORK CONSISTS OF SIX INTERCONNECTED ELEMENTS:



1. START WITH FUTURE WORKFORCE NEEDS

The most effective early careers programmes start with a clear view of the future workforce the organisation is trying to build.

Historically, some organisations approached early careers as a recruitment activity. Each year the business would be asked how many graduates or apprentices it wanted, recruitment targets would be set, and the focus would be on filling vacancies. While this approach may meet short-term hiring needs, it is unlikely to create the workforce required to deliver future business goals.

The most effective employers are repositioning early careers as a strategic talent pipeline. Rather than asking how many people need to be hired this year, they are starting with a broader question: what capabilities will the organisation need three, five or even ten years from now. How can those capabilities be built sustainably? Which early careers entry routes can most effectively build these capabilities over time?

Employers need to take a longer-term perspective. As CRF's research on Strategic Workforce Planning has highlighted, workforce planning is fundamentally about understanding the capabilities required to deliver the business strategy, assessing current capability, identifying future gaps and taking action to close them. It requires organisations to take a "future-back" view, working backwards from future business requirements rather than simply extrapolating from today's workforce. For many organisations, this is leading to a more deliberate "build vs. buy" approach, where early careers pathways are used to develop future-critical skills internally where external supply is constrained or unstable.

EARLY CAREERS PROGRAMMES SHOULD THEREFORE BE DESIGNED AS PART OF A BROADER TALENT PLANNING PROCESS. BEFORE DECIDING WHAT PROGRAMMES TO RUN, ORGANISATIONS NEED TO UNDERSTAND:

- What capabilities will be critical to future business success?
- Which skills are likely to become more important, and which less important?
- What demographic, technological and labour market trends are likely to affect talent supply?
- Where are the greatest workforce risks?
- Where do organisations have fragile or insufficient talent pipelines for critical roles or capability areas?
- Which capabilities can realistically be bought from the external labour market, and which will need to be developed internally?
- Which capabilities can realistically be developed through early careers pathways rather than hired fully formed?
- How long does it take to build capability in critical areas and what does this mean for the timing of investment in early careers pathways?

As Nicola Luke, Senior Manager Next Generation Strategy and Programmes at BT explained:

> *"For early careers to deliver what the business needs requires a strong strategic workforce plan that tells you where the gaps are emerging, where you expect growth and reductions and where there are potential workforce cliff edges you need to anticipate."*

Similarly, Gareth Kenward, Senior Emerging Talent Manager at Babcock International described how workforce planning informs decisions about future hiring needs:

> *"My team will work with the business to understand what projects are coming in and what will be needed to resource them. We're looking at multiple timescales up to around five years out. In the final eighteen months it's about nailing down specific needs such as numbers and specific skills."*

This represents a shift away from annual demand forecasting towards a more dynamic approach to talent planning. As we set out in CRF's Future-Ready Talent Management research, talent planning needs to become a continuous process focused on identifying future-critical capabilities and building talent supply around them, rather than a periodic exercise focused on headcount forecasting. Organisations need to manage talent supply chains in much the same way they manage other critical business resources.

LOOKING BEYOND IMMEDIATE HIRING NEEDS

Several organisations highlighted the importance of considering demographic trends when designing early careers programmes.

In sectors with ageing workforces, early careers investment is best viewed as a long-term risk mitigation strategy. Employers are looking not only at current vacancies but also at future retirement patterns, succession risks and potential shortages of specialist expertise.

MBDA provides a good example. The organisation has used early careers hiring to address a significant demographic imbalance in its workforce.

"Our early careers programmes have helped us fix the age distribution profile in our business. We've moved from a place where the curve was way off to the right with our biggest population being the over-45s to having a much better shaped distribution curve to set us up for the long term," said Andrew Marchant, Graduate & Apprentice Programmes Lead.

This illustrates an important point. The value of early careers programmes is often realised many years after the initial hiring decision. Organisations that view early careers purely through the lens of annual recruitment costs risk under-investing in a capability that may prove critical to future business success.

> *"Our early careers programmes have helped us fix the age distribution profile in our business. We've moved from a place where the curve was way off to the right with our biggest population being the over-45s to having a much better shaped distribution curve to set us up for the long term,"*
>
> **Andrew Marchant**
> Graduate & Apprentice Programmes Lead

UNDERSTANDING THE EXTERNAL TALENT MARKET

Workforce planning also requires organisations to understand how external talent supply is changing.

Many employers described concerns about the availability of future skills, changes to the education system and ongoing uncertainty around apprenticeship policy and funding. At the same time, the pace of technological change is making it harder to predict exactly which skills will be required in future.

Rather than attempting to forecast every future role, the most sophisticated organisations focus on identifying a relatively small number of critical capabilities that are likely to underpin future success.

This approach mirrors wider developments in talent management. Rather than trying to create exhaustive inventories of skills, the most effective organisations are concentrating on future-critical capabilities and workforce segments that create disproportionate value. The objective is not to predict the future perfectly, but to identify where investment in talent is most likely to create strategic advantage.

> *"It might mean helping institutions understand the technologies their students will be using when they are hired by us, so they can be better prepared,"*
>
> **Ashley Clifford**
> Global Head of Early Talent, People, NatWest

For some organisations, this is leading to closer partnerships with educational institutions. NatWest, for example, is exploring how insights from workforce planning can be used to shape academic curricula and strengthen the connection between education and employment. *"It might mean helping institutions understand the technologies their students will be using when they are hired by us, so they can be better prepared,"* said Ashley Clifford, Global Head of Early Talent, People. Severn Trent Water has gone further by developing apprenticeship standards in specialist areas such as hydrology where future skills shortages are anticipated.

These types of partnerships are increasingly supported by providers like BPP, who combine education delivery with employer insight, helping align curriculum design, pathway development and workforce demand.

Such approaches reflect a recognition that organisations cannot simply consume talent from the labour market. Increasingly, they need to play an active role in shaping future talent supply.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CAREERS LEADERS

The practical implication is that decisions about graduates, apprenticeships, internships and work experience programmes should not be made in isolation.

The starting point should be a clear understanding of the future workforce the organisation is trying to build. That means looking beyond next year's hiring targets and considering the capabilities, workforce profile and talent risks that will shape business success over the longer term.

Employers that do this well treat early careers as an integral part of workforce planning and talent strategy. Those that do not risk building programmes that are well executed operationally but disconnected from the organisation's future needs.

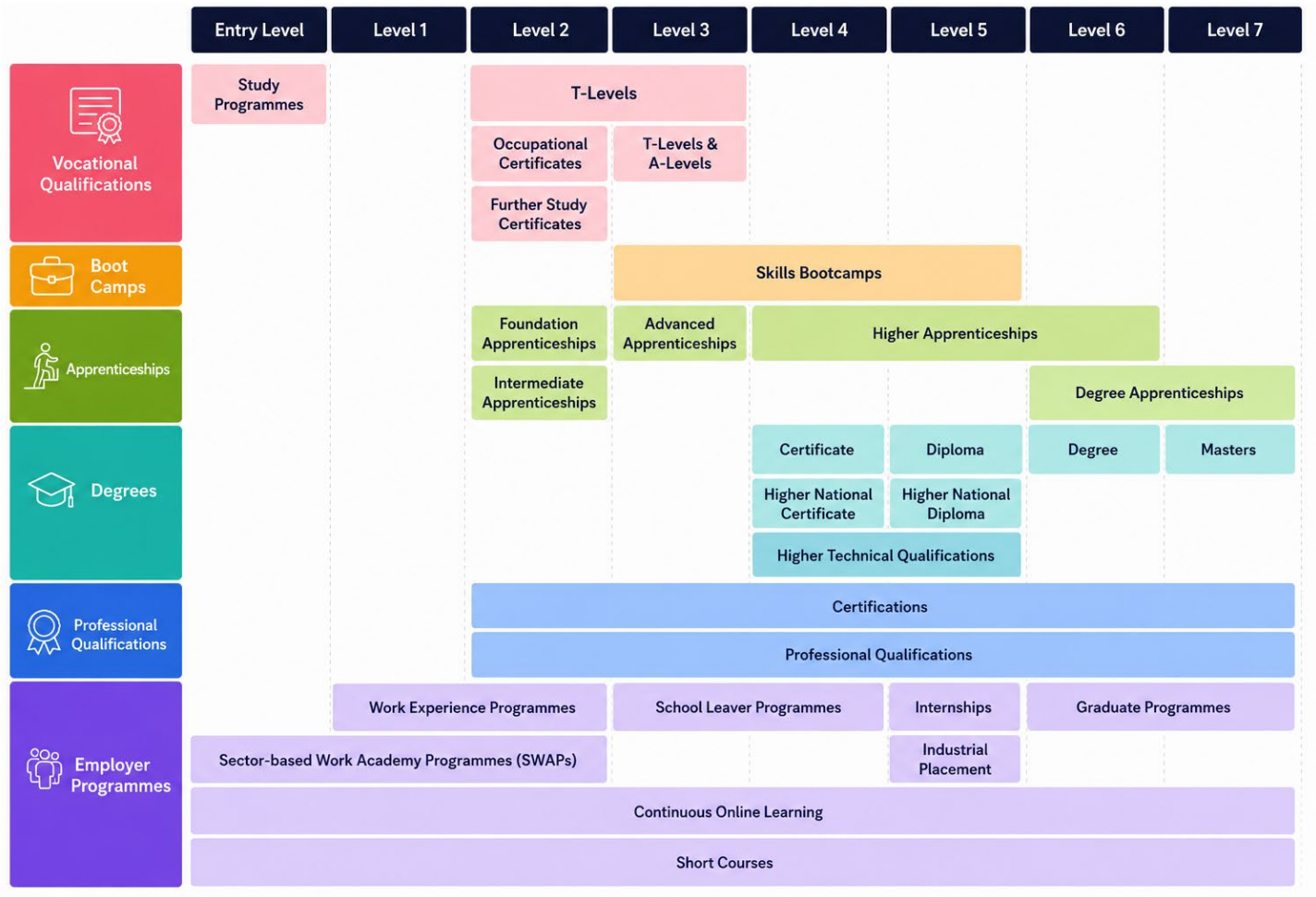
2. DESIGN THE RIGHT PORTFOLIO OF PATHWAYS

Once organisations have identified the capabilities they need to build, the next question is how those capabilities should enter the organisation. The focus needs to shift from individual programmes to combining different entry routes deliberately to build distinct types of capability. This includes earlier forms of engagement such as work experience programmes.

Historically, many early careers programmes centred on graduate recruitment, with apprenticeships and work experience operating alongside them as largely separate initiatives. Increasingly, employers are taking a broader view. Rather than asking whether graduates or apprentices are the better option, they are designing portfolios of pathways that serve different workforce needs and attract talent from different backgrounds.

In chapter 1, we explored how entry routes have expanded beyond graduates and apprenticeships, including degree apprenticeships and structured school leaver programmes alongside pre-employment routes such as industry placements and sector-based work academy programmes. This is increasing the range of options available to employers. The BPP framework below illustrates the breadth of pathways available across different levels and stages.

PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS AND PATHWAYS



SOURCE: BPP

THE FOUR PATHWAYS EXPLAINED

In practice, BBP's broader portfolio of pathways can be grouped into four categories, based on how employers engage with them and where in the talent lifecycle they sit.

1. SUPPLY ROUTES EMPLOYERS RECRUIT FROM

These are the established education pathways that produce early careers talent, where employers are not the primary funder but play a key role in recruitment and, in some cases, in shaping provision.

Further education pathways, including BTECs and emerging V Levels, remain a major source of Level 2 and Level 3 talent. They are largely government-funded through the 16–19 system, with employers engaging through curriculum input, employer visits, and recruitment activity.

Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) provide Level 4 and 5 technical skills aligned to occupational standards and employer demand. They are typically funded through a mix of learner loans and employer sponsorship, giving organisations access to higher-level technical talent without requiring full degree pathways.

University degrees continue to underpin graduate recruitment pipelines, with funding primarily flowing through government-backed student loans to individuals. Employers engage through partnerships, placements, and graduate hiring rather than direct funding in most cases.

2. DIRECT HIRING ROUTES

These are programmes where the employer is the primary designer and funder of the entry route, with a direct link to employment from day one or shortly afterwards.

Apprenticeships provide structured, work-based routes from Level 2 through to Level 7, combining employment with training. They are funded through a mix of employer levy contributions and government subsidy, with recent reforms increasing flexibility and support for younger learners.

Graduate programmes are employer-designed entry pathways for degree holders, typically funded fully by the employer and aligned to leadership or specialist capability development.

Internships and industrial placements offer time-bound entry points, often linked to higher education, allowing employers to assess and shape talent before permanent hiring. These are typically employer-funded.

School leaver programmes provide direct entry routes for 18-year-olds outside of apprenticeships, combining employment with structured internal development. These are also employer-funded and used to widen access to talent.

3. PRE-HIRE PIPELINES EMPLOYERS CAN SHAPE

These routes sit before formal employment and allow employers to influence the quality and readiness of talent entering their organisation.

Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs) combine short pre-employment training, work experience, and a guaranteed interview. They are funded by DWP, with employers contributing through delivery and recruitment.

Skills Bootcamps are short, intensive programmes aligned to priority skills areas, often designed with employers to meet specific hiring needs. They are funded through the Adult Skills Fund, with employers involved in curriculum design and recruitment.

T Level industry placements provide structured work experience within a government-funded qualification. While the education is funded by the public system, employers play a critical role in delivering the placement and often use it as a recruitment pipeline.

4. POST-ENTRY DEVELOPMENT

These routes sit after hiring and are used to build capability and accelerate progression within early careers populations.

Professional qualifications and certifications provide industry-recognised skills and are typically funded by employers as part of workforce development.

Short courses and continuous online learning offer flexible upskilling, particularly in fast-moving or technical areas. These are primarily employer-funded, with some provision supported through public funding streams such as the Adult Skills Fund.

Taken together, these categories show that early careers strategy is no longer defined by a single entry route. Employers are combining supply routes, direct hiring pathways, and pre-employment pipelines, then reinforcing them with structured post-entry development. The value comes from how these elements are joined up to create a coherent flow of talent into the organisation and through it.

ALIGNING PATHWAY TO PURPOSE

The most effective organisations start by being clear about the purpose of each pathway. Different workforce challenges require different solutions. A programme designed to develop future leaders may look very different from one designed to build technical capability in a scarce skills area. Programmes designed to develop skills in fast-moving technologies will need to move more rapidly to avoid skills becoming out of date. The question is not which pathway is best, but which pathway is the best fit for creating the capabilities the organisation requires.

KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP DETERMINE THE MOST SUITABLE PATHWAYS FOR SPECIFIC BUSINESS NEEDS INCLUDE:

- Which roles or capability areas are best suited to each pathway, and where could alternative routes be introduced?
- Where could job design be adapted to allow individuals to develop capability through different entry routes, rather than requiring full proficiency at the point of hire?
- How can pre-employment routes such as work experience, placements and pre-employment programmes be used to identify and prepare future hires?
- How easily can individuals move between pathways over time, and where are pathways unintentionally creating fixed or siloed career tracks?
- Where could new or underutilised pathways be introduced, including those delivered in partnership with providers through funded or unfunded models?

The distinction between pathways is becoming increasingly important as organisations rethink the balance between breadth and depth. Leadership pathways often emphasise broad organisational exposure, rotations and cross-functional experiences. Technical pathways increasingly focus on accelerated skills acquisition and earlier immersion in specialist work. Where the focus is on technical skills, this might result in shorter, more targeted programmes. *"For technical graduates who join us into specialist roles we are redesigning graduate programmes to be completed in shorter time periods, with less focus on rotations,"* said NatWest's Ashley Clifford. *"This supports them to build specialist knowledge more quickly and avoids the technical skills debt that can build over time when technology moves so quickly."*

For leadership pathways, breadth is often seen as more important. As Nicola Luke at BT observed: *"If you're developing future leaders, you probably want to invest in rotations to help them understand different aspects of the business. However, if you're bringing in someone to develop deep technical skills that's more likely to be a narrowly focused programme."*

Several employers described moving away from one-size-fits-all approaches. *"We've moved away from generic graduate programmes to focus on specific functional graduate programmes focused on engineering, finance and technology,"* said Neil Morrison, Group HR Director at Severn Trent Water. Ashley Clifford at NatWest highlighted a growing convergence between graduate and apprenticeship pathways, which increasingly lead to similar career destinations: *"Historically, graduates and apprentices tended to follow different career pathways and enter the organisation at different starting points. Today, we see them as two different routes that can ultimately lead to the same destination."*

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES

NATWEST

"For technical graduates who join us into specialist roles we are redesigning graduate programmes to be completed in shorter time periods, with less focus on rotations,"

BT

"If you're developing future leaders, you probably want to invest in rotations to help them understand different aspects of the business."

SEVERN TRENT

"We've moved away from generic graduate programmes to focus on specific functional graduate programmes focused on engineering, finance and technology."



What may once have been viewed as distinct career tracks are increasingly becoming alternative routes to the same opportunities. This convergence highlights the importance of equal standing between pathways, with progression determined by performance and capability rather than entry route and reinforces the need for movement between pathways rather than fixed tracks at entry.

This shift reflects broader changes in how young people view education and work. Rising tuition fees, higher living costs and the prospect of carrying substantial student debt for much of their working lives are influencing career choices. Several employers reported growing interest in pathways that allow people to earn while they learn, gain work experience earlier and avoid taking on significant levels of debt.

For individuals from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, these considerations can be particularly important. While university remains the right choice for many, the financial implications can act as a barrier for some capable young people. Employers increasingly recognise that relying exclusively on graduate recruitment may inadvertently narrow the available talent pool and limit access to professional careers for those who choose not to, or cannot afford to, follow a traditional university route.

As a result, many organisations are expanding alternative pathways into professional and specialist roles. The legal sector provides a good example. Alison Dixon, Partner at Bird & Bird highlighted how the profession has broadened access routes into solicitor careers:

"A key change we have seen is the opening up of entry routes so we no longer just recruit graduates for solicitor roles. The mix of early careers is becoming much more diverse, which gives employers more options to be creative and forward-thinking in terms of workforce planning."

Degree apprenticeships featured prominently in our discussions. Employers view them as an attractive way of combining formal learning with practical experience while widening access to talent. They offer individuals the opportunity to gain qualifications without accumulating significant debt, while enabling organisations to develop capability in a more targeted way.

Work experience, industrial placements and vacation schemes are also playing a more important role in pathway design. These programmes serve multiple purposes. They help organisations identify future talent, assess candidates' suitability in a real-life context, provide opportunities for individuals to gain practical workplace experience and support social mobility by exposing young people to careers they may not otherwise have considered.

Several employers highlighted the growing importance of identification schemes that allow both parties to assess fit before a permanent hiring decision is made. One professional services firm reported that more than half of its graduate intake now comes through such schemes:

"We help them build relevant skills during their time on the programme, it gives them a leg up and helps with pre-boarding. We can't rely on universities to develop those skills on our behalf."

The 2026 Milburn review highlighted the paradox faced by young people: entry level jobs, particularly in retail and hospitality played an important role in preparing young people for the world of work, but these roles are harder to secure.

Some organisations are experimenting with new approaches to make these opportunities more accessible. Penguin Random House, for example, allocates places on some work experience programmes through random selection. This helps manage application volumes while reducing some of the advantages enjoyed by candidates who already possess strong professional networks or familiarity with recruitment processes.

Others are extending pathways beyond traditional graduate and apprenticeship populations altogether. Nando's recruits around 10% of its new hires through community hiring programmes delivered in partnership with a national charity. These programmes support people facing barriers to employment while helping the organisation access talent that might otherwise be overlooked. These developments reflect a broader shift towards actively designing and testing new pathways in collaboration with providers like BPP, rather than relying solely on established programme models.

The design choices organisations make about pathways increasingly reflect both business and societal considerations. Employers need different routes to build different types of capability. At the same time, they are recognising that broadening access to opportunity can strengthen talent pipelines, improve workforce diversity and increase resilience in the face of changing labour market conditions.

"A key change we have seen is the opening up of entry routes so we no longer just recruit graduates for solicitor roles. The mix of early careers is becoming much more diverse, which gives employers more options to be creative and forward-thinking in terms of workforce planning."

Alison Dixon
Partner, Bird & Bird

BREADTH VS. DEPTH – ROTATIONS OR REAL JOBS?

Another important design decision concerns the balance between rotations and direct placement into roles. Historically, rotational programmes were often viewed as the gold standard of graduate development. Today, some organisations are questioning whether this remains the most effective approach in all circumstances.

Standard Chartered has consciously moved away from rotations for some populations.

"We bring people straight to desk on day one because that creates a level of accountability for individuals within the business," said Urvi Jobalia, Global Head of Early Careers. *"Business leaders have a higher sense of ownership and individuals build a depth of experience that gets them to expected performance levels faster."*

However, the organisation has been careful to ensure that participants still gain exposure to different parts of the business through cross-functional projects which provide an opportunity to tackle key strategic challenges facing the bank. This allows participants to practise business skills while building a network and exposure to senior leaders.

Keyloop hires directly into entry-level roles and then offers an accelerated development programme for those who demonstrate high performance and high aspiration. The programme runs alongside the participants' day-to-day role and involves regular cross-cohort virtual learning sessions, Business Connect days where participants experience functions outside their own and a business challenge project.

Other organisations continue to place a high value on rotational programmes, particularly where the objective is to develop future leaders with broad organisational understanding.

Justine Rawding, Vice President Talent and People Strategy at Shell, said: *"We still value rotations. We are a complex business and because of our size and scale there is value in being able to offer a suite of experiences."*

The Financial Conduct Authority is moving from 17-18 divisional graduate schemes to five broader rotational pipelines, because they wanted graduates to understand the financial services lifecycle, experience more of the organisation before specialising and, according to Emily Goodyear, Head of Early Careers, "experience all areas of the FCA strategy".

Ultimately, pathway design is becoming more nuanced. Rather than relying on a single model, organisations are building portfolios of pathways that reflect different capability needs, different learning journeys and different routes into employment. The challenge for employers is to ensure that these pathways form part of a coherent talent system rather than a collection of disconnected programmes.

BREADTH

- Cross-functional exposure
- Networks
- Future leadership

DEPTH

- Accountability
- Specialist experience
- Faster perfomance

3. BUILD CAPABILITY AND WORK READINESS TO DRIVE PERFORMANCE

As we discussed in chapter 1, early careers employers are finding they need to do more to help young people become work ready once they have joined. Organisations need to design learning and development pathways that meet multiple needs including building skills, learning how to navigate the organisation and get along with colleagues. This requires a shift from designing roles and programmes around fixed jobs to building capability at a broader skills level, such as around resilience and adaptability.

For many organisations, this means focusing first on the basics. Time management, communication skills, professional behaviours, resilience, personal accountability and relationship-building all featured prominently in discussions with employers.

Several employers noted an increasing need to support young people through the practical realities of entering the workplace, such as what to wear at work or basic nutrition.

> *"For the first time, we are starting to invest purely in the skills required for the transition to work. It will get people to think about their concerns, how they might need to adjust and help them understand the responsibilities they're expected to take on from day one."*
>
> **Andrew Marchant**
> Graduate & Apprenticeship Programmes Lead, MBDA

BEFORE DESIGNING LEARNING INTERVENTIONS, ORGANISATIONS SHOULD BE CLEAR ON HOW CAPABILITY AND WORK READINESS WILL BE DEVELOPED. KEY QUESTIONS INCLUDE:

- What level of work readiness can realistically be expected at entry, and what needs to be developed within the first 12 to 24 months?
- What are the defined workplace readiness skills that are required?
- How should development be structured across experience, formal learning and coaching to build these capabilities effectively?
- How can learning be integrated into the role so that individuals build capability while contributing to business outcomes?
- How do we ensure consistency in capability development across different entry routes and starting points?



In this context, the goal of early careers development is to build a set of core workplace readiness skills that act as the foundation for ongoing development. A useful model is BPP's Adaptive Professional framework which organises these into nine core skills, covering problem solving, analytical reasoning, effective communication, teamwork and collaboration, resilience and adaptability, and digital fluency among others.

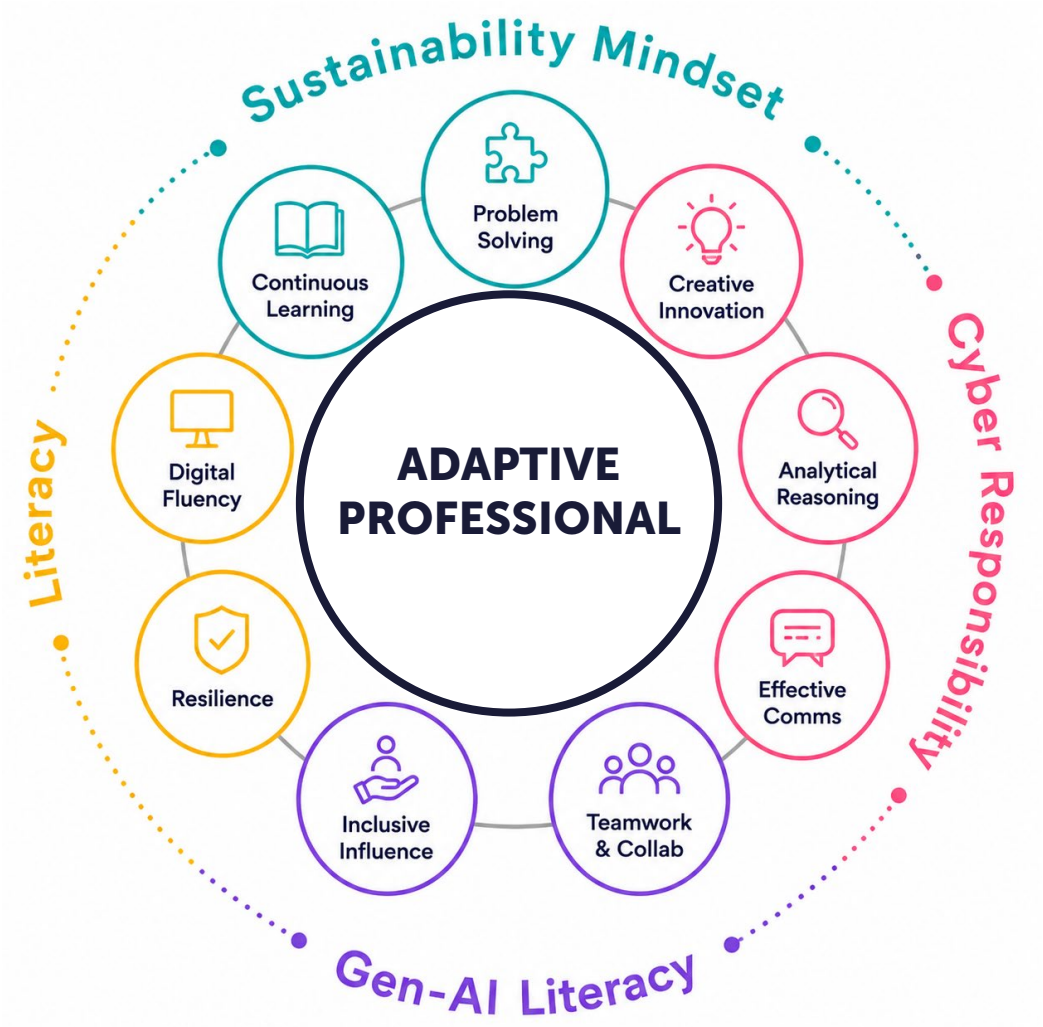
Sitting across all nine are three emerging workforce challenges that are reshaping what organisations need from early career professionals: Gen-AI Literacy, Sustainability Mindset, and Cyber Responsibility. These are not additions to a development programme but lenses through which the core skills must increasingly be applied. Strong communication becomes more valuable when someone can communicate about AI implications or sustainability trade-offs; analytical reasoning matters more when it is being used to validate AI outputs or assess cyber risk.

Core workplace readiness skills and these emerging capabilities should therefore be embedded consistently across programme activities and applied through real work, projects and structured reflection

Many organisations are investing earlier in the employee lifecycle. Pre-boarding is becoming more common, with employers providing guidance on workplace expectations before people join to accelerate the transition into effective performance. For example, DLA Piper has developed a series of short-form digital content modules covering practical topics such as writing an email, professional etiquette, dress code and workplace norms, delivered in a style that reflects how many early careers hires typically consume content.

Alongside foundational skills, employers are placing greater emphasis on data literacy, critical thinking and AI capability. The challenge is not simply teaching people how to use technology but helping them develop the judgment required to use it effectively.

BPP'S ADAPTIVE PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORK



THE BROKEN CAREER LADDER – PREPARING FOR AI TO TAKE OVER ENTRY LEVEL TASKS

> *"While it may be tempting to use AI to accelerate performance from day one, without repeated cycles of real experience, like making decisions, seeing consequences or repairing mistakes, people lack the internal reference points needed to critically evaluate, adapt, or challenge AI generated content."*
>
> **Caroline Taylor**
> Executive Director, The Oxford Group

As AI reshapes entry-level work and organisations redesign how capability is built, AI is changing both the skills required and how those skills are developed and applied. Historically, junior employees built expertise by repeatedly performing relatively routine tasks under supervision, gradually developing the knowledge and judgment required to tackle more complex work. Increasingly, those tasks can be automated. Organisations therefore need to think carefully about how expertise, judgment and professional confidence are developed when some traditional learning experiences are disappearing. In some cases, this may mean intentionally limiting the use of AI for certain tasks, even where it could improve short-term productivity, in order to preserve opportunities for learning, reasoning and professional judgment during the early stages of capability development.

> *"How do we equip people to exercise judgment on the outputs of AI, not just generate the output in the first place? How do we prepare people to know what a good outcome looks like, even if they've never had to go through the traditional steps?"*
>
> **Kate Evans**
> Chief People Officer at Norton Rose Fulbright

This challenge is already visible in professions such as law, where AI is being deployed to perform activities that would previously have been assigned to trainees, including aspects of legal research, due diligence and document review. While this can improve productivity, it also risks removing some of the experiences through which professional judgment is developed.

Several organisations are responding by becoming more explicit about the skills and experiences people need before they are permitted to rely heavily on AI. DLA Piper, for example, has adopted a simple framework that identifies the core skills trainees are expected to demonstrate and assesses whether each skill has been "Secured" or remains "Pending or Developing".

Another approach is to require trainees to compare AI-generated and non-AI outputs and explain the differences between them. The objective is not simply to produce the right answer, but to develop the ability to evaluate quality, identify weaknesses and exercise judgment about when technology can and cannot be trusted.

As Nicky Bizzell, Interim Head of Early Careers at DLA Piper, observed:

> *"The difference is about application of judgment. More and more we are asking trainees to make critical judgments about when and how to apply technology and not just make an assumption that the answer provided by the technology is right.* This suggests a shift in focus from performing tasks to evaluating and improving outputs. "

This suggests a shift in focus from performing tasks to evaluating and improving outputs.

In practice, this may mean deliberately creating opportunities for early careers employees to experience tasks manually before automating them, exposing them to examples of flawed AI outputs, or building exercises that require them to explain the reasoning behind a decision rather than simply provide an answer.

The challenge for employers is ensuring that AI does not remove the lowest rungs of the development ladder before alternative routes to expertise have been established. The organisations making the greatest progress appear to be those that treat judgment as a capability that must be developed intentionally, rather than assuming it will emerge automatically through exposure to technology.

AS ONE EMPLOYER PUT IT:

> *"Before we train you on how to use the technology, we're first going to train you on how to apply judgment when you use it."*

AI is also changing the way learning is delivered and integrated into work. CRF's research on Creating an Effective Learning Ecosystem highlighted how technology is being used to make learning more personalised, relevant and integrated into the flow of work, and this is also being seen in the development programmes that underpin early careers. For example, KPMG has developed Spark AI, a coach that takes learners on a personalised learning journey through their early career. According to Matt Worman, Head of Lifelong Learning, *"We are building a profile of what early careers look like in years 1, 2 and 3 and beyond. What learning should it be surfacing at different stages and how do we call specific skills out for individuals at the right time and guide them to what they need?"* Some employers are also experimenting with AI simulation tools which can recreate the experience of building expertise through tackling tasks that become increasingly complex.

This reinforces the need to design capability building intentionally, combining workplace readiness, technical skills and emerging skills in ways that can be applied in real work.

The organisations making the greatest progress appear to be those that view capability development as an intentional process rather than something that happens automatically through experience.

> *"One of the pitfalls of AI, especially with junior populations, is that the technology is so powerful that you can easily end up with an AI-first approach. We are advocating a think-first approach so people are actually thinking through the problem first before applying AI"*
>
> **Laura Seiler**
> Talent & Reward Director, EMEA and APAC, Norton Rose Fulbright

4. CREATE THE SCAFFOLDING FOR SUCCESS

Perhaps one of the strongest messages from our research is that the organisation systems that support early careers talent – the scaffolding - must be set up effectively so employers can realise their investments in early talent. This shows up in two important ways: line managers of early careers talent need to be properly equipped and prepared to offer the level of support needed in early career and executive sponsorship can make or break early careers programmes.

LINE MANAGER CAPABILITY

> *"Early careers programmes succeed or fail upon the experience young people get of their supervisor."*
>
> **Richard Hamer**
> Education Director, BAE Systems

For early careers employees, capability is developed primarily through day-to-day work rather than formal programmes. This means the quality of the immediate environment, and particularly the effectiveness of line management, is a critical factor in determining whether early careers programmes deliver their intended outcomes.

The importance of line managers was raised by almost every organisation we interviewed. Line managers provide feedback, create opportunities, build confidence, clarify expectations and help people navigate the transition into work. In many cases, they are the most significant influence on whether an early careers employee succeeds. Lincoln Blair, Deputy Director at the Office for National Statistics, said: *"Early careers hires are learning how to work, not just how to do the specific thing we've asked them to do. The quality of that support can have a significant impact on how successfully people develop and progress at the start of their careers."*

TO CREATE THE RIGHT CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS, ORGANISATIONS SHOULD CONSIDER:

01 How consistent is the experience of early careers employees across teams and line managers?

02 To what extent are line managers equipped to support individuals with different levels of work readiness, confidence and experience?

03 What level of structure, clarity and support is provided in the first 90 days, and how does this shape early performance?

04 How are coaching, feedback and ongoing development embedded into day-to-day management practices?

05 How well equipped are managers to provide feedback, career guidance and coaching?

06 How effectively are managers supporting the development of both workplace readiness skills and emerging capabilities such as AI literacy?

The responsibility of line managers is becoming more demanding. Many employers reported that early careers entrants require more support than previous generations, particularly in relation to confidence, resilience, mental health and navigating workplace relationships. Additionally, as AI impacts the work undertaken by entry level roles, managers will be on the front line. They will be required to help individuals learn how to use AI productively without bypassing the experiences through which expertise, critical thinking and judgment are developed.

Supporting early careers talent requires a different approach from managing experienced employees, with greater emphasis on structure, clarity, frequent feedback and coaching. As discussed earlier, this is particularly important for post-covid cohorts who are also facing practical barriers to work readiness due to limited prior work experience, lower confidence and gaps in understanding workplace norms.

As a result, organisations need to invest deliberately in manager capability, including structured training in coaching, goal setting, giving feedback and supporting early careers. For example, BPP's Unlocking Gen Z Talent programme equips managers with the skills to support early careers employees.

It's also important to set out managers' responsibilities for early career talent. Howden Insurance, for example, runs half-day workshops for all early careers managers as well as internal briefing calls. In addition to making the expectations of line managers clear and explicit, they are preparing managers to handle topics such being clear on workplace norms and unwritten rules, providing timely, ongoing feedback, being visible and accessible, supporting studying and learning, creating opportunities for exposure and role modelling professionalism.

Sainsbury's is developing guidance for manager expectations in each rotation in terms of behaviour, autonomy and contribution, which managers can use as a basis for giving feedback.

MENTORING AND REVERSE MENTORING

Mentoring also remains an important feature of many programmes. Several organisations emphasised the value of matching mentors from outside an individual's immediate team, increasing exposure to different parts of the business and broadening organisational networks.

Some organisations encourage people who have recently completed an early careers programme to sign up as mentors. For example, BAE Systems is planning to pilot an Early Careers ambassador/buddying programme which would see some former apprentices and graduates supporting new entrants to the company's early careers training programmes. As well as providing support, this could help future line managers build their management skills informally.

Reverse mentoring, where early careers entrants are paired with senior employees, is also being becoming more common. This helps build work readiness skills as younger employees gain exposure to senior colleagues and also allows them to demonstrate competence and teach others in areas such as digital and technical skills.

These approaches are increasingly being used not just to support individuals, but to strengthen organisational understanding of early careers talent and improve their overall employee experience.

EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP

> *"Early careers are an integral part of how we do business. Even when budgets are under pressure, our CEO will be the first to say 'We're not cutting the apprenticeship programme; we're not cutting off our nose to spite our face.'"*
>
> **Neil Morrison**
> Group HR Director, Severn Trent Water

Executive sponsorship is another differentiator playing an important role in reinforcing expectations around line management and ensuring early careers is recognised as a strategic priority rather than an operational activity. At organisations such as BAE Systems, the CEO, Chair and Board members actively engage with graduates and apprentices, reinforcing the message that early careers talent matters to the organisation.

Many employers have also established graduate councils, apprentice networks and ambassador programmes. These provide practical support while creating mechanisms through which organisations can learn from participants and continuously improve the employee experience.

Taken together, these practices create the "scaffolding" around the programme. They do not replace good programme design, but they often determine whether that design succeeds in practice.

5. CONNECT EARLY CAREERS TO THE WIDER TALENT SYSTEM

One of the most common weaknesses identified in our research was what happens when the programme ends.

Organisations often invest considerable effort in attracting, selecting and developing early careers talent, only to provide limited support once individuals transition into permanent roles.

Several employers reported increased turnover in the years immediately following programme completion. This suggests that the hand-off between early careers and broader talent processes deserves greater attention.

This is a critical transition point. Where early careers programmes are not connected to what follows, organisations risk losing the capability they have invested in building.

The most effective organisations treat early careers as the beginning of a longer talent journey rather than a self-contained programme. This requires stronger integration with succession planning, career development, talent reviews and internal mobility processes.

Babcock International, for example, transitions individuals into destination roles several months before programme completion. This allows them to establish relationships and settle into their future role before formal support from the Emerging Talent team is fully passed to the business.

The Pictet Group distinguishes early career employees and more seasoned "emerging professionals," who continue to receive targeted support as they progress towards full productivity and career maturity. While specific initiatives may vary across the Group, Pictet Asset Management, for example, runs career workshops that teach skills in career management, personal branding, and continuous learning. These workshops are particularly helpful for emerging professionals, enabling them to reflect on their career progress and plan for further development.

Several organisations are also rethinking the connection between early careers, mid-career programmes and high potential leadership pipelines. This often includes an assessment or development centre at the end of the programme which forms an entry point for accelerated development programmes or stretch work assignments. In practice, this requires clear linkage between capability building in early careers and the skills required later in the organisation, aligning early careers programmes to defined career pathways and progression routes.

These approaches reflect a broader shift towards more flexible career journeys, where individuals continue to build capability across roles and experiences rather than progressing through a fixed sequence of positions. As CRF's previous research has highlighted, this is often accompanied by investment in digital self-service talent solutions, talent marketplaces and open talent markets. These are seen as important tools in helping early careers employees manage their careers and gain access to development opportunities.

The underlying principle is straightforward. The purpose of early careers programmes is to create future capability for the organisation. That value is only realised if organisations successfully convert early potential into long-term performance. This requires employers to maintain a clear line of sight from initial entry through to longer term contribution, ensuring that capability built in early careers is continually developed, applied and retained.

6. MEASURE IMPACT AND CONTINUOUSLY ADAPT

Early careers programmes have historically been evaluated using recruitment metrics such as applications, hires and programme completion rates. While these measures remain important, they provide only a partial picture of success. The most effective programmes view early careers as an investment that delivers longer-term business value.

Organisations in our research increasingly emphasised the need to connect early careers investment to business outcomes. Standard Chartered's redesign of its programme was explicitly driven by a desire to demonstrate commercial value.

As Mustafa Jaffar, Global Head, Talent, explained:

> *"The moment we hooked the early careers discussions into what it means commercially for your business and the value that early careers can bring, and we line up the measures of success with these requirements, that's when sponsorship starts to become real."*

THIS REQUIRES ORGANISATIONS TO THINK MORE CAREFULLY ABOUT WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE. RELEVANT MEASURES MIGHT INCLUDE COMPARING EARLY CAREERS PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS AGAINST CONTROL GROUPS ON METRICS INCLUDING:

- **BUSINESS OUTCOMES:** Performance; productivity; cost to build vs. buy
- **CAPABILITY OUTCOMES:** Time to competence; skills acquisition
- **TALENT OUTCOMES:** Retention; progression; mobility; leadership pipeline strength
- **INCLUSION OUTCOMES:** Access; diversity; social mobility

Several organisations emphasised the importance of identifying leading indicators rather than relying solely on lagging outcomes.

Sainsbury's, for example, built a business case for its graduate programme by comparing the long-term economics of developing talent internally with hiring externally at equivalent levels.

The evaluation process needs to include a feedback loop that supports continuous improvement and considers questions such as: What have we learned? What's working and what's not? What should we stop, start or redesign? How do we know outcomes improved?

DATA

Measuring impact requires organisations to access consistent, high-quality data across the learner lifecycle, linking assessment and development to performance and progression outcomes

Having a strong data baseline is important to allow comparison of performance over time and root cause analysis of which elements of the programme drive outcomes. For example, Shell has a rigorous analysis process. This means it can track career outcomes and employee satisfaction over multi-year time horizons and identify which aspects of the programme drive differentiated performance and accelerated development. *"Our focus on data-based decision making helps us make sure we are delivering the agreed outcomes on early careers which are right for our business and our context,"* said Justine Rawding.

Achieving consistent data across a global organisation is a valuable opportunity to strengthen how we understand and develop early careers talent. Michelle Thomas, Global Early Careers Manager at Inchcape, highlighted that definitions such as 'apprenticeship' can vary significantly across regions, making early alignment especially important. By agreeing clear definitions from the outset, organisations can build a strong, consistent baseline and gain more meaningful insights over time. *"Getting the baseline right enables us to track progress with confidence and make more informed decisions"*.

Qualitative feedback is equally important. Many employers use surveys, councils and focus groups to understand the experience of participants and identify opportunities for improvement.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that early careers programmes should be managed as strategic talent investments rather than recruitment costs. Like any strategic investment, they require clear objectives, meaningful measures and a willingness to adapt as business needs evolve.



CONCLUSION

Young people entering the labour market today face a paradox. There are more routes into work yet accessing these opportunities is becoming harder. Competition is intense, application processes are more complex, traditional signals of capability are becoming less reliable, and many young people have fewer chances to gain the work experience, confidence and workplace understanding that help them make the transition from education into employment.

For employers, this is both a workforce planning challenge and a social responsibility. Early careers remains one of the most important ways organisations can develop the skills they will need in the years ahead and strengthen talent pipelines. But it is also one of the most practical ways employers can contribute to the prospects of the next generation through creating meaningful opportunities for young people to experience work, understand what employers are looking for and build confidence.

At a time when the media narrative is that AI may reduce employment prospects for young people, employers can offer a different message. AI will change entry-level work, but it does not remove the need for young people, nor the value they bring. The organisations that will benefit most are those that redesign early careers deliberately, opening up access, working with education and public bodies, supporting managers and creating the conditions in which young people can learn, contribute and thrive.

"We're at a pivotal point in the UK where we have to take action to make sure there is a bright future for young people. Collectively across industries, we will need to lean in to develop the next generation of leaders. It won't work to assume we can just 'buy in' talent mid-career and offshore/automate/AI more junior work... it needs to be more balanced than that. AI is of course transforming the world of work, including the work itself, so we will need to double down on building new skills and understanding 'grass roots' and upwards to assure the next generation of local talent"

Faye Frater
SVP HR, IHG

RESEARCH PARTICIPATION LIST

Alexandra Bayliss, Group Learning & Development Manager – Early Careers and Essential Skills, Howden Insurance

Alison Dixon, Partner, Bird & Bird

Andrew Marchant, Graduate & Apprentice Programme Lead, MBDA

Andy Moss, Chief Customer Officer, City & Guilds

Anna Castiglione, Director of Data Innovation, ManpowerGroup UK

Ashley Clifford, Global Head of Early Talent, People, NatWest

Ben Blackledge, CEO, WorldSkills UK

Caroline Taylor, Executive Director, The Oxford Group

Carly Collins, Talent Programmes Manager, Sainsbury's

Charlie Ball, Head of Labour Market Intelligence, Jisc

Claire Tyler, Head of Insights, ISE

Dan Doherty, Head of Marketing & Creative Solutions – Emerging Talent, Group GTI

Desarai Govender-Deokumar, Learning and Development Manager, Keyloop

Emily Goodyear, Head of Early Careers, Financial Conduct Authority

Emma O'Dell, Skills and Capability Director, BPP

Emma Roberts, Director of External Affairs, WorldSkills UK

Faye Frater, SVP HR, IHG

Frederick Neill, Talent Partner, CERN

Freya Walker, Head of Student Recruitment, KPMG

Gareth Kenward, Senior Emerging Talent Manager, Babcock International

Georgina Huntley, People and Culture Director, ManpowerGroup UK

James Robson, Director of SKOPE and Associate Professor in Tertiary Education System, University of Oxford

James Thorne, Senior Vice President and Chief of People Officer, McDonald's

Justine Rawding, Vice President Talent and People Strategy, Shell

Kate Evans, Chief People Officer, EMEA and APAC, Norton Rose Fulbright

Laura-Jane Rawlings MBE DL FCGI FIEP, Chief Executive Officer, Youth Employment UK

Laura Seiler, Talent & Reward Director, EMEA and APAC, Norton Rose Fulbright

Lincoln Blair, Deputy Director, Office of National Statistics

Liza Friart, Senior Learning and Talent Development Manager, Pictet Asset Management

Lore Taillieu, Head of Talent Acquisition, CERN

Martin Birchall, Founder and Managing Director, High Fliers Research

Matt Worman, Head of Lifelong Learning, KPMG

Michelle Bury, Global Head of Talent Engagement and Development, Keyloop

Michelle Thomas, Global Early Careers Manager, Inchcape

Mustafa Jaffar, Global Head, Talent, Standard Chartered

Natacha Vogel, HR Business Partner, Pictet Asset Management

Neil Morrison, Group HR and Communications Director, Severn Trent

Nichola Hay MBE, Director of Apprenticeship Strategy and Policy, BPP and Board Member of Skills England

Nick Caesar, Head of Learning and Talent Development, Pictet Asset Management

Nicky Bizzell, Interim Head of Early Careers, DLA Piper

Nicola Luke, Senior Manager Next Generation Strategy and Programmes, BT

Richard Hamer, Education Director, BAE Systems

Sam Sharmay, Head of Recruitment and Employer Brand, Penguin Random House

Sarah Roché, Cibyl & Advisory Practice lead, Group GTI

Tom Lewis, Policy Adviser, Universities UK

Urvi Jobalia, Global Head of Early Careers, Standard Chartered

REFERENCES AND READING LIST

High Fliers' The Graduate Market in 2026

Graduate Outcomes Survey HESA (June, 2026)

ISE Student Recruitment Survey (2025)

PwC's 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer

ISE Student Development Survey (2026)

OECD's The Importance and Benefits of Workplace Experience for Teenagers

Office for Students – Analysis of Degree Classifications Over Time (2026)

2025 Youth Voice Census

2026 Milburn Review

Office for National Statistics (ONS) - Access to Hybrid Work

Lambert and Schindler (2026) The Broken Ladder: AI, Remote Work and Early-Career Hiring

The Prospects Early Careers Survey (2024)

Skills England – Methodology for Establishing the Pathways to Priority Occupations Measure (2026)

CRF research on Strategic Workforce Planning

CRF - Future-Ready Talent Management

CRF - Creating an Effective Learning Ecosystem

CRF: BUILDING HR CAPABILITY

RESEARCH, LEARNING, EVENTS AND PEER EXCHANGE:

- Independent research combining practitioner perspectives and academic insight
- On Demand, Open and Custom Learning Programmes
- Annual UK, European and UAE events programme
- Specialist Networks and Communities for peer exchange
- Advisory Support
- AI Simulation and Research Tools

FIND OUT MORE VIA OUR WEBSITE ›

JOIN OUR CLIENTS INCLUDING...

Associated British Foods plc | IHG HOTELS & RESORTS | Microsoft | Swiss Re

BAE SYSTEMS | KPMG | Nando's | TESCO

NatWest | Shell | Spotify | WD-40 COMPANY

BPP is a global education provider delivering a full-range of qualifications for professionals at every stage of their career. This includes professional qualifications, university degrees, apprenticeships, work-based learning, and accredited short courses. Established for over 50 years, we deliver courses in law, accountancy, technology, management, nursing and more. Our education is delivered to be as real-world, relevant and innovative as possible.

For more information visit www.bpp.com

BPP LYCEUM EDUCATION GROUP