



# Graduates, Five Years Apart: What the Data Shows

A skill-by-skill analysis of what graduates are bringing to employers today, and how the graduate skills landscape has changed since 2021.



## Five years of data, skill by skill.

Graduates entering the workforce over the past five years have lived through two unusual shifts in a short time: a pandemic that disrupted their early education and the fastest adoption of a new technology most workplaces have ever seen.

This report tracks each of SHL's 11 Graduate skills separately across that period. That skill-level detail matters far beyond the hiring decision. Many graduate schemes place people into a specific role or rotation once they've been accepted, and the right placement depends on which skills stand out, not just whether the candidate's overall profile cleared the bar.

This report draws on five years of SHL data, covering 509,911 graduates who took the Global Skills Assessment, to ask: has the graduate skill profile changed since 2021, and if so, where? The findings are intended as context, a picture of what today's graduate skill profile looks like, based on five years of data, useful alongside the insights your organization already has about your own graduate population.

# The 11 skills that predict graduate success

SHL's Graduate 8.0 Job-Focused Assessment measures 11 skills, identified through job analysis conducted with partner organizations globally as predictive of success in graduate roles across a wide range of industries.

| Skill name                           | Definition                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Takes responsibility                 | This measures the extent to which the candidate is accountable for work outcomes and accepts responsibility when things go wrong.   |
| Fosters team cohesion                | This measures the extent to which the candidate energizes the team and keeps them cohesive.                                         |
| Maintains good working relationships | This measures the extent to which the candidate puts effort into developing good relationships with others.                         |
| Analyzes information                 | This measures the extent to which the candidate identifies key factors and integrates information to understand data or situations. |
| Learns quickly                       | This measures the extent to which the candidate picks up new information and techniques easily.                                     |
| Generates new ideas                  | This measures the extent to which the candidate creates innovative approaches.                                                      |
| Uses time efficiently                | This measures the extent to which the candidate manages own time and delivers work on schedule.                                     |
| Works to high-quality standards      | This measures the extent to which the candidate completes every task with a high degree of quality.                                 |
| Adapts to change                     | This measures the extent to which the candidate accepts and adapts to changes without difficulty.                                   |
| Copes with setbacks and criticism    | This measures the extent to which the candidate stays positive when facing difficulties and does not dwell on negative events.      |
| Strives to achieve                   | This measures the extent to which the candidate sets demanding goals and makes a determined effort to meet or exceed them.          |

Graduates are rated Low, Medium, or High on each skill. Every percentage shown in this report indicates the share of graduates who earned a High score on that skill. When this report says a skill “rose to 36%” or “fell to 28%,” it means that percentage of graduates earned a “High” score on the skill that year, not that the skill itself reached that level.

As a reference point, the assessment is designed so that around 30% of graduates are expected to earn a “High” score on any given skill under typical conditions. Figures well above or below that benchmark suggest that a skill stands out as unusually strong or weak.

The global figures in this report are based on representative data from graduates assessed across the measured years (N = 509,911), not an average across regions. Some regions contribute far more assessments than others. The global figure reflects the overall population rather than an equal blend of each region.

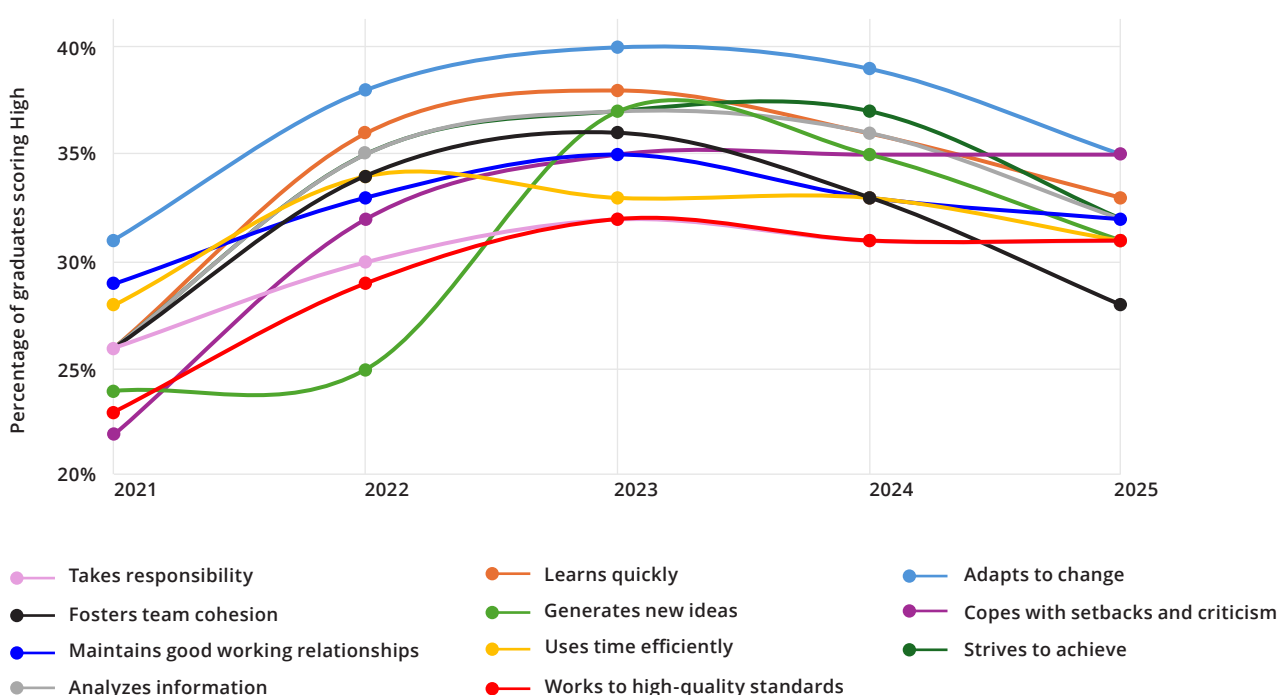
# 2023: the turning point in graduate skills

With few exceptions, the five years of data follow one clear shape: broad improvement to 2023, then a general decline.



## What the data shows

Percentage of graduates scoring High, by skill (2021-2025)



Some of the 2021-2023 rise is likely a rebound rather than a genuine gain. The 2021 baseline sits at the tail of pandemic disruption, when [earlier research](#) into that generation of graduates flagged resilience and coping under pressure as weak points. Recovering from a low point would show up in the data as a climb, even without graduates becoming meaningfully more skilled.

The 2023-2025 decline looks like a different story. It tracks closely with generative AI tools becoming part of everyday campus life. Widespread student adoption took hold through 2023, so a graduate assessed in 2024 or 2025 could have used AI-enabled tools throughout much of their university tenure. That gap in timing may explain why the decline shows up a year or two after AI's arrival rather than straight away. We read this as a plausible driver behind the pattern, but not a relationship this data can prove on its own.

## Why this matters

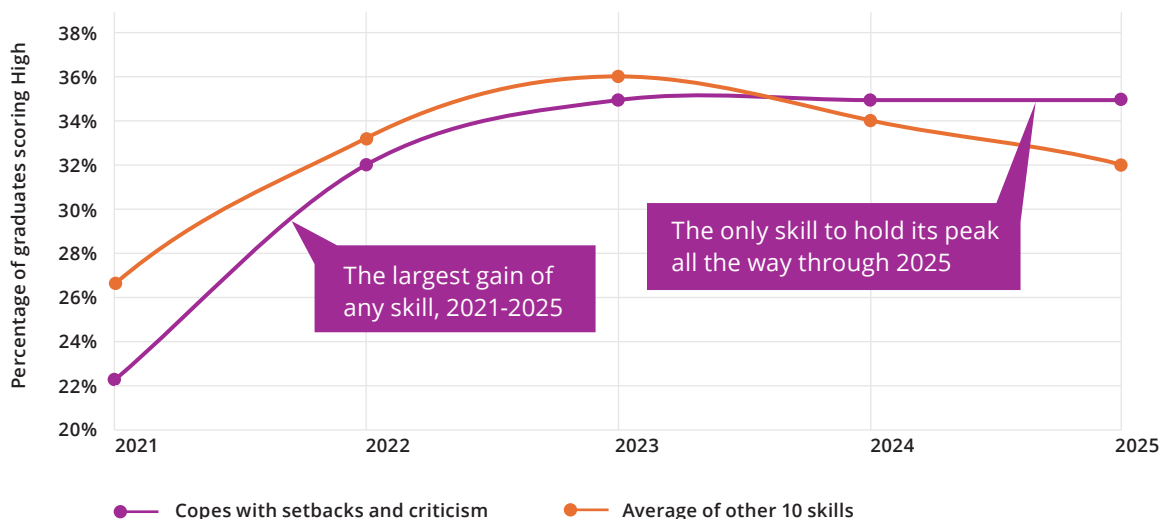
If a graduate cohort is performing differently in assessments compared to cohorts your organization hired in 2022 or 2023, check that against this five-year pattern before treating it as a change specific to your own pipeline. That period was a high point across the graduate population generally, so a shift since then likely reflects a wider pattern rather than something about your own sourcing or talent pool.

# Resilience: the one exception

While every other skill declined somewhat from its 2023 peak, one kept climbing and simply held.

## Why this stands out

**Percentage of graduates scoring High:  
Copes with setbacks and criticism vs. all other skills (2021-2025)**



Two possible shared experiences of these graduates have been identified to potentially explain why this skill didn't follow the same pattern as the rest.

- The tendency to stay positive when facing difficulties, and to not dwell on setbacks, isn't built through coursework or touched by AI tools directly. It's shaped by a candidate's personal experience of setbacks and recovery over time, suggesting it may only be observed over years rather than within a single assessment cycle.
- Graduates measured across this period lived through real disruption early on: cancelled exams, isolation and uncertainty over their futures. Having already overcome widespread challenges, it's plausible they built a level of resilience through practice not necessary for older candidates that has simply held since.

Both explanations point the same way: this skill develops over years. That may be why it's held steady while other skills moved, even without us knowing exactly what's driving those other changes.

## Why this matters

If the assumption that graduates are less resilient than previous generations comes up in a hiring panel or a conversation about graduate quality, check it against this finding before accepting it. The data runs the other way: candidates coming through now score notably higher on this specific skill than they did in 2021, while most of the rest of the profile has declined.

# Team cohesion: the sharpest fall

Most skills declined somewhat after 2023. One declined far more than the rest.

## What the data shows

### Fosters team cohesion vs. the rest of the profile



*Fosters team cohesion* fell further than any other skill in the dataset, from 36% of graduates earning a High score in 2023 to only 28% earning a High score in 2025. Most other skills that declined after 2023 lost a smaller, more consistent share of their peak, typically 3 to 6 points. An 8-point drop puts *Fosters team cohesion* in a category of its own and leaves it as the single weakest skill in the graduate profile.

*Maintains good working relationships* fell by only 3 points over the same period, which may seem counterintuitive as the two might sound similar enough to be assessed as one. However, they measure different things: *Fosters team cohesion* involves energizing a team and keeping it working well together, while *Maintains good working relationships* reflects the effort a candidate puts into building relationships with others. A graduate can build strong one-to-one relationships without naturally energizing a group, and that's exactly the gap the data is showing.

Treating the two seemingly similar skills as interchangeable, despite their distinct definitions, would have missed this finding entirely: one fell far more than the other.

## Why this matters

If a strong result on one of these two skills is being read as saying something about the other, check that assumption against the data first. *Fosters team cohesion* and *Maintains good working relationships* sound related, but while one has fallen further than any other skill in this profile, the other has barely moved. These differences in how they change show that the skills are distinct and independent of one another. *Fosters team cohesion* involves bringing the team together, whereas *Maintains good working relationships* focuses on building strong personal relationships with individual people. A high score on one does not necessarily mean a high score on both.

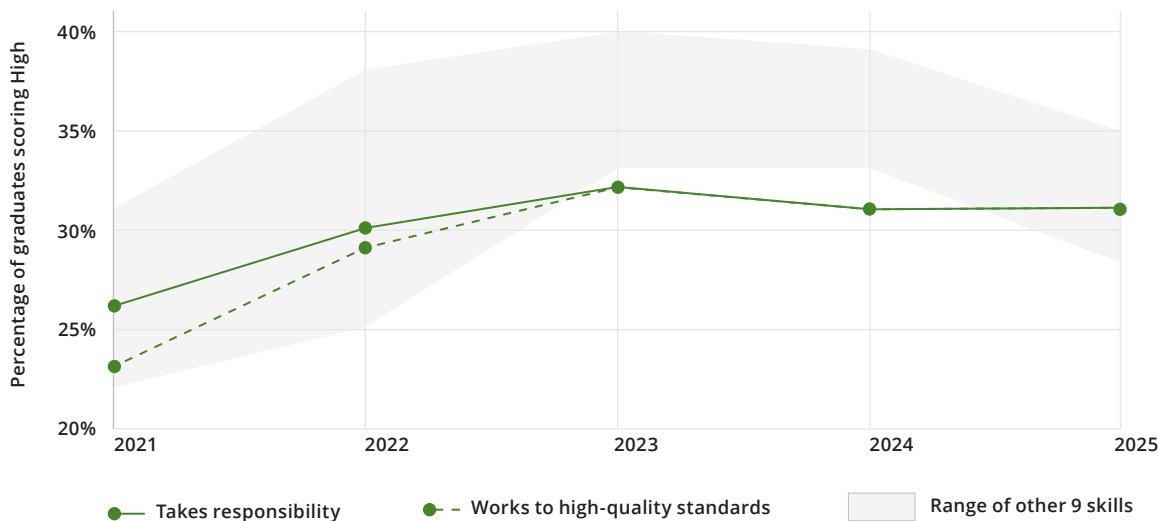
If you see this trend difference in your own data, respond directly: graduates who score lower on *Fosters team cohesion* are likely to benefit from early team-based projects or rotations that put them in a defined team role with the opportunity to contribute to a collaborative culture, giving them real opportunities to practice energizing a group rather than just contributing individually.

# Two skills that never had a peak to lose

In the years the rest of the profile was strongest, two skills were already behind.

## What the data shows

**Percentage of graduates scoring high: takes responsibility and works to high-quality standards vs. the range of other skills (2021-2025)**



Two skills break from this pattern entirely: *Takes responsibility* and *Works to high-quality standards*. In 2023 and 2024, while the rest of the profile was performing especially well, these two skills remained exceptionally low. By 2025, that gap narrowed, but only because the rest of the profile fell back toward lower scores. Across the full five years, *Takes responsibility* and *Works to high-quality standards* remained the two skills with the lowest share of graduates earning a High score overall.

One plausible reading connects back to the pandemic-era rebound described earlier in this report. If part of the wider rise reflected a return to more typical conditions after disruption, that explanation didn't seem to extend to these two skills. Accepting accountability when something goes wrong and holding a consistent quality standard aren't obviously the kind of behaviors pandemic disruption would have reduced in the first place, so there may have been less of a dip for these two to recover from. However, this conjecture cannot be confirmed by this data alone.

## Why this matters

If a candidate's profile looks unusually strong on *Takes responsibility* or *Works to high-quality standards*, that's worth noting as a less common result, not an average one. Both have been the two lowest-scoring skills in this profile for five years running, so standing out in an areas where few candidates excel can be a valuable differentiator.



## What five years of data adds up to

Most of the graduate profile moved together: up sharply to 2023, back down since. *Copes with setbacks and criticism* didn't follow that shape, holding its 2023 level through 2025. *Takes responsibility* and *Works to high-quality standards* didn't either; both sat at roughly the same level from 2021-2025, never moving substantially with the rise or the fall. Finally, *Fosters team cohesion* and *Maintains good working relationships*, two skills close enough in definition to seem interchangeable on the surface yet distinct in their behavioral indicators, changed by very different amounts; one fell further than anything else in the profile, the other far less.

Changes weren't uniform across skills, and the response isn't a one-size-fits-all instruction either: early careers teams should consider context and ongoing widespread skill shifts when interpreting graduates' scores.

# Why SHL?

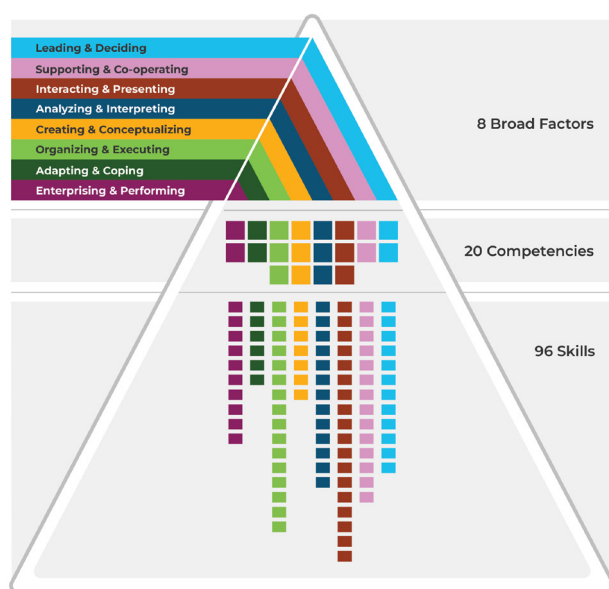
SHL has a long history of scientific research into what predicts success at work. We use data from the 45 million candidates we assess each year to help organizations understand the talent around them.

SHL's **Graduate Hiring solution** helps you form a comprehensive view of every hire, supporting a talent strategy built on evidence rather than assumption.

Our validated toolkit helps organizations identify current and future potential through clear, actionable talent insights, designed to give candidates an engaging assessment experience.

## What makes SHL's behavioral skills unique?

**Objective | Scientifically-rigorous | Work-relevant | Predictive | Reliable | Holds proven results**



SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF) Skills Taxonomy is a scientifically validated model for understanding and assessing people's behavior at work. Built on decades of empirical research, it links broad competencies to 96 behavioral skills and real-world business outcomes.

Five years of data show that graduate skills don't move together: they shift at different times, for different reasons, and to very different degrees. Observation of these trends requires measuring skill by skill, not relying on a single overall score. SHL's assessments are built to give you that detail, year after year, as each new graduate cohort arrives.



**Hire, onboard and develop the right graduate talent with SHL.**

Learn more at [shl.com/graduate](https://shl.com/graduate).

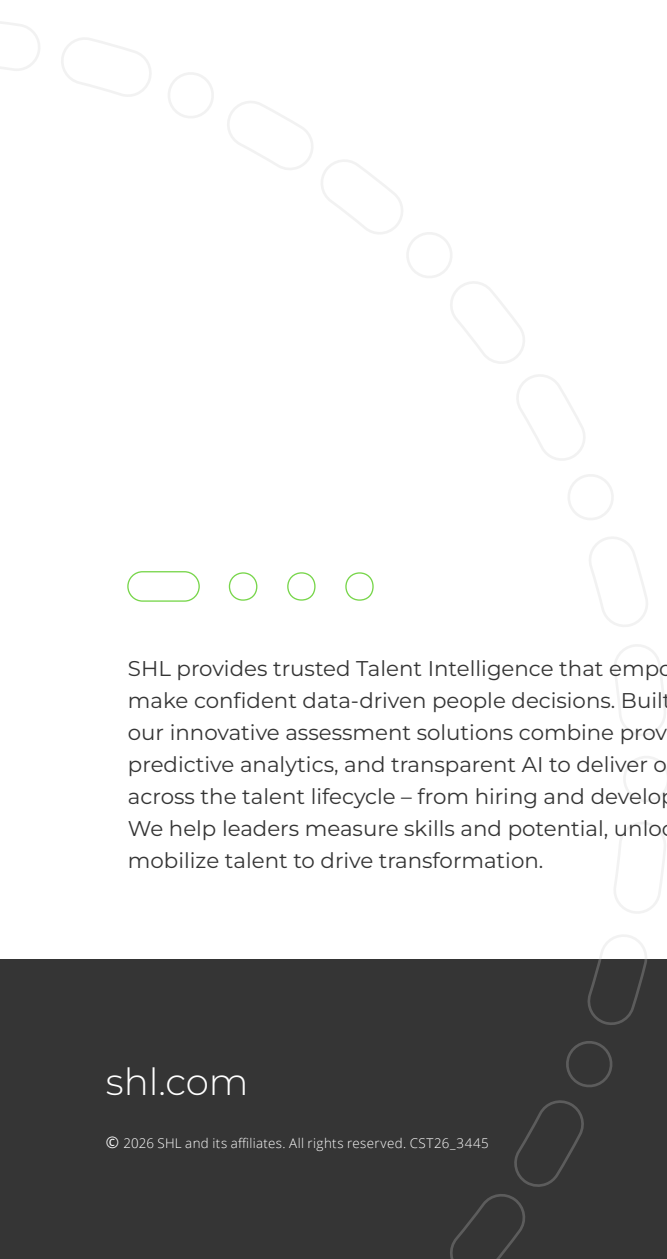
# Appendix

## Five-year data by skill (2021-2025)

Percentage of graduates scoring High, by skill and year.

| Skill                                | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Takes responsibility                 | 26%  | 30%  | 32%  | 31%  | 31%  |
| Fosters team cohesion                | 26%  | 34%  | 36%  | 33%  | 28%  |
| Maintains good working relationships | 29%  | 33%  | 35%  | 33%  | 32%  |
| Analyzes information                 | 26%  | 35%  | 37%  | 36%  | 32%  |
| Learns quickly                       | 26%  | 36%  | 38%  | 36%  | 33%  |
| Generates new ideas                  | 24%  | 25%  | 37%  | 35%  | 31%  |
| Uses time efficiently                | 28%  | 34%  | 33%  | 33%  | 31%  |
| Works to high-quality standards      | 23%  | 29%  | 32%  | 31%  | 31%  |
| Adapts to change                     | 31%  | 38%  | 40%  | 39%  | 35%  |
| Copes with setbacks and criticism    | 22%  | 32%  | 35%  | 35%  | 35%  |
| Strives to achieve                   | 26%  | 35%  | 37%  | 37%  | 32%  |

2021 figures for some regions were excluded from the global calculation due to insufficient sample size, so the 2021 column reflects a narrower population than 2022 to 2025.



SHL provides trusted Talent Intelligence that empowers organizations to make confident data-driven people decisions. Built on 45+ years of expertise, our innovative assessment solutions combine proven behavioral science, predictive analytics, and transparent AI to deliver objective, actionable insights across the talent lifecycle – from hiring and development to internal mobility. We help leaders measure skills and potential, unlock performance, and mobilize talent to drive transformation.

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