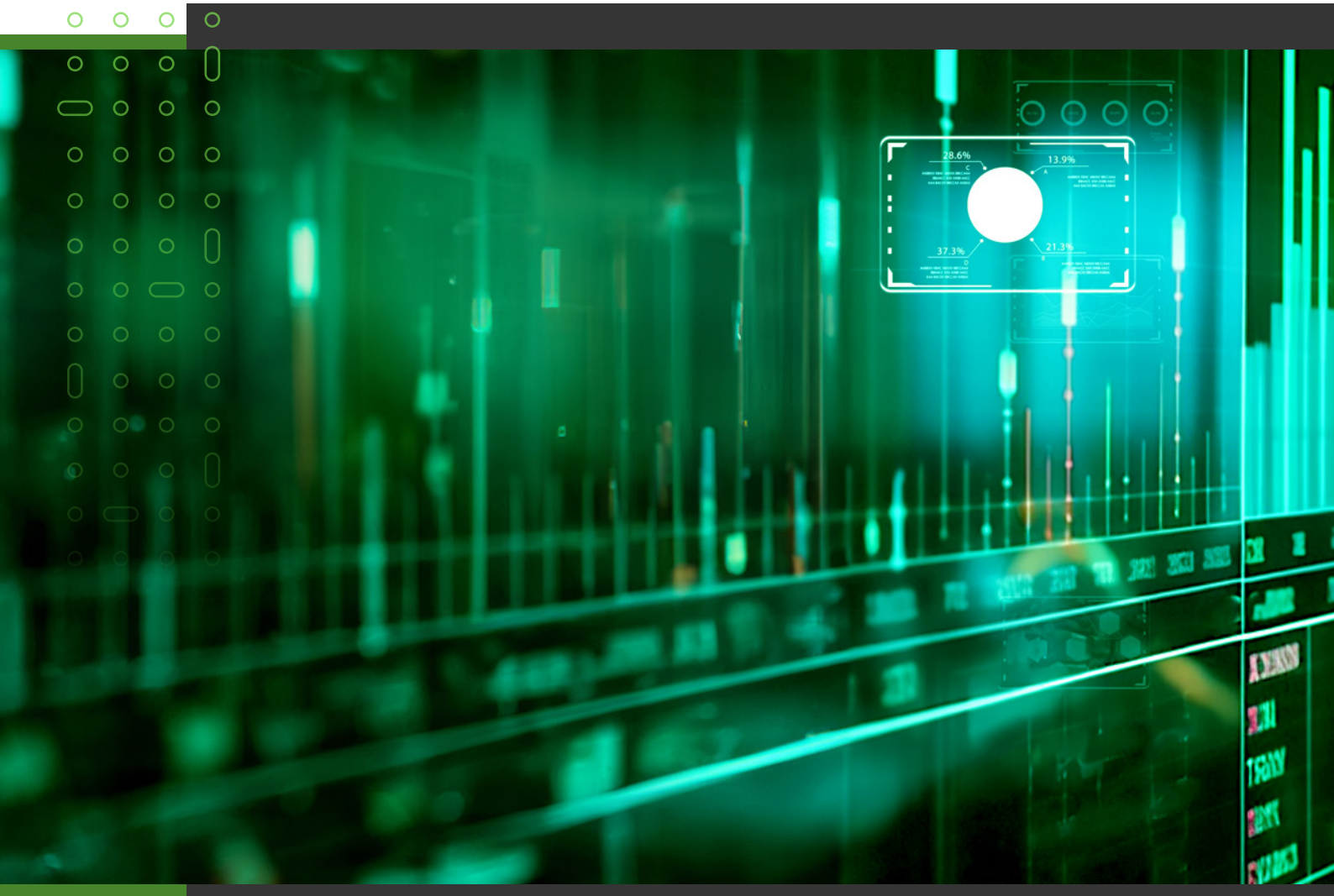
Talent Mobility at Work in 2026

The Hidden Workforce

How employees experience career growth, skills development and opportunity in the age of AI and why organizations are overlooking the talent they already have.



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Executive Summary

For years, organizations have approached workforce challenges through the lens of acquisition: finding more people, recruiting faster and competing harder for external talent. New data from SHL's Workforce Perspective Survey 2026 suggests employers may be overlooking a more valuable source of skills and capability – the talent already inside their organization.

There is a strong willingness in the UK and US workforce to learn new skills, adapt to changing roles and build careers with their current employers. Although 4 in 5 employees want to know which internal roles match their skills and experience, two-thirds still believe they need to leave their current employer to advance.

The research points to a growing talent mobility gap. Employees want organizations to recognize their skills, make internal opportunities visible and invest in their development. At the same time, only 2 in 5 feel their manager fully understands their skills beyond their job title, while workers in both the US and UK say employers often favor external hiring over promoting or reskilling existing employees.

Artificial intelligence is adding another dimension to the mobility challenge. AI is already embedded in working life, and employees show considerable appetite for using it to support their careers. But the emergence of what SHL calls 'AI Rebounding' – employees being replaced by AI and later asked to return – also highlights the risks of making workforce decisions without a complete understanding of human capability.

The value of getting talent mobility right extends beyond retention or workforce planning. Nearly four in five workers agree that the promise of career advancement with their employer increases their fulfilment and engagement. Creating clearer pathways for people to grow therefore represents more than a career development opportunity: it can strengthen the employee experience while helping organizations retain and deploy the skills they already have.

Taken together, the findings suggest that closing the talent mobility gap will depend on how effectively organizations can turn skills visibility into real opportunities for growth, progression and movement.

At a glance: Six key findings

Workforce Overall	US	UK	Workers
66% believe they'll need to leave their employer to advance			
84% want to know which internal roles match their skills and experience	84%	85%	want employers to show them internal roles matching their skills and experience
83% would retrain to take on a more senior role within their organization	91%	87%	would complete a formal skills assessment to demonstrate their capabilities
42% believe their manager fully understands their skills beyond their job title	59%	49%	say their employer favors external hiring over reskilling or promoting existing employees
61% believe employers should remove degree requirements for most or almost all jobs	48%	36%	say their manager fully understands their skills beyond their current job title
52% have some connection to people that have been replaced by AI and later asked back	78%	73%	would use an AI-powered career coach to identify skills gaps and career opportunities
	19%	13%	say they have personally been laid off/replaced by AI and later rehired by the same employer

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest percentage for illustrative purposes. See page 11 for full breakdown

Overview

In July 2026, SHL commissioned a survey of workers in the US and UK exploring how people experience career development, skills and mobility at work, alongside the growing impact of AI. The study reveals a workforce ready to learn, retrain and progress, but a widening gap between employees' appetite for internal mobility and organizations' ability to recognize their skills and connect them with opportunities.

The Talent Mobility Gap

Employees are willing to learn but they cannot see development and career pathways

For organizations struggling to fill skills gaps, the research reveals an important contradiction: employees are highly willing to move and develop – more than 4 in 5 would retrain to take on a more senior role, and a similar proportion would retrain for a different role altogether. Yet many still expect to have to leave their employer to progress.

Nearly two-thirds believe they are very or somewhat likely to need to leave their employer to advance rather than move up internally. Yet more than 80% want their employer to show them other internal roles that match their skills and experience.

The findings suggest the barrier to internal mobility isn't necessarily employee ambition or willingness to learn. It is whether organizations can identify where skills sit, understand how they transfer and connect people with opportunities.

The data

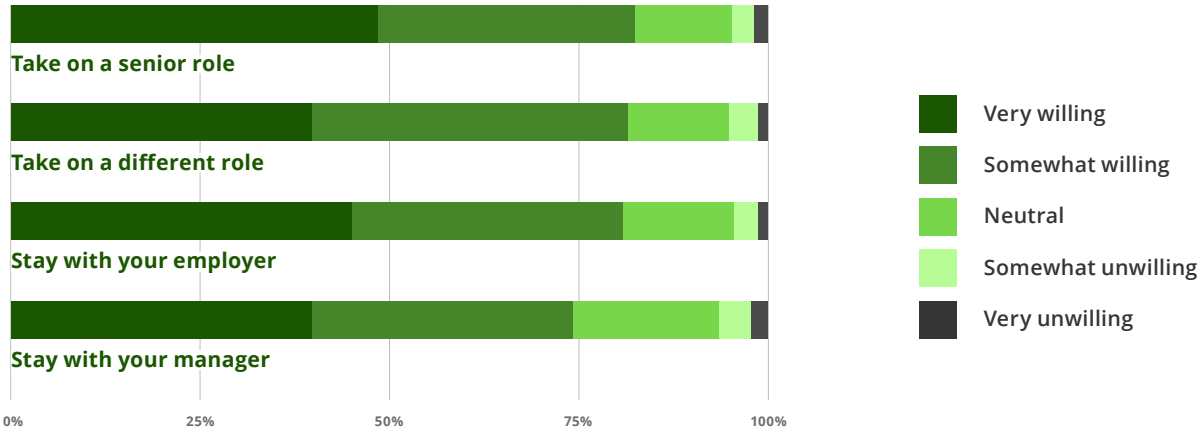
- **66.4%** believe they'll need to leave their employer to advance in their career
- **84.4%** want employers to show them internal roles matching their skills and experience
- **82.5%** would retrain for a more senior role
- **81.6%** would retrain for a different role altogether
- **41.2%** say the skills they would gain matter more than job title when evaluating an offer, whereas **19.4%** prioritize title or status

The takeaway for HR

For talent mobility to be effective, visibility is key. That means understanding the skills people have today, their reskilling potential and where those skills could take them next, and communicating them clearly to both employees and their managers.

Workforce perceptions

Employee willingness to retrain or reskill for opportunities within their organization



The Hidden Workforce

People leaders don't know what their people can do

Internal mobility depends on knowing what people in the workforce can do beyond the role they perform today. For many employers, that visibility is missing.

The visibility gap shows up in the research. Globally, only 2 in 5 say their manager fully understands their skills beyond their job title. In the UK, that falls to just over 1 in 3, compared with nearly 1 in 2 in the US.

At the same time, nearly 60% of US workers and 50% of UK workers say their employer favors hiring externally over reskilling or promoting current employees.

Most workers say their skills are being fully utilized, but among the 1 in 5 who say they are not, the most common explanation – for more than 2 in 5 – is that their role doesn't provide opportunities to use them. Nearly 1 in 5 say their manager is unaware of their skills.

That creates a hidden workforce: capability that exists inside organizations but isn't visible enough to influence deployment, development or career decisions.

The data

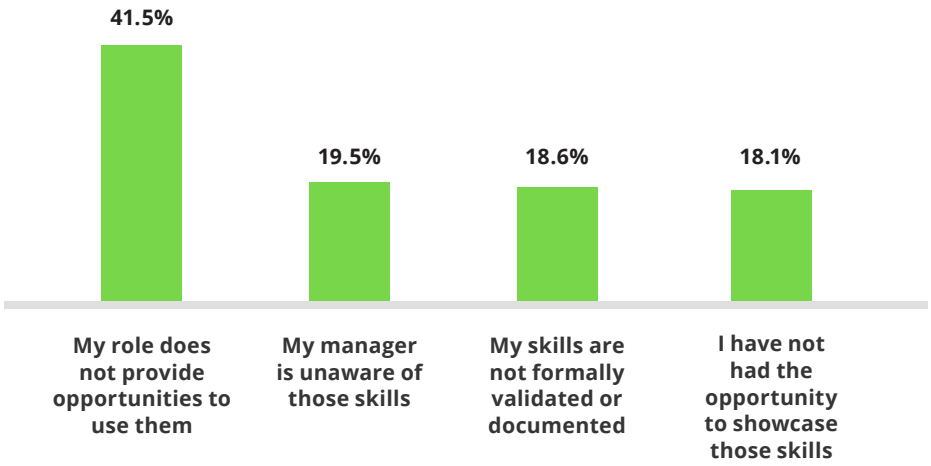
- Only **41.8%** say their manager fully understands their skills beyond their job title
- **47.5%** of US workers say their manager fully understands their skills, compared with **35.9%** in the UK
- **54.3%** of workers say their employers favour external hiring, which is the case for **59.1%** of US workers and **49.4%** of UK workers
- **21.7%** say their skills are not fully utilized
- Among those who feel underutilized**, 41.5%** say their role doesn't provide opportunities to use their skills and **19.5%** say their manager is unaware of them

The takeaway for HR

Without a reliable and consistent view of workforce skills, organizations risk recruiting externally for capability they may already employ – while employees leave to find opportunities they couldn't see internally.

Workforce perceptions

Top reasons their skills go underutilized



Skills are becoming the currency of mobility

Workers are ready to prove what they can do – if it leads somewhere

Employees increasingly want career opportunities to reflect what they can do, rather than simply the qualifications they hold.

Just over 60% believe employers should drop degree requirements for most or almost all jobs. Nearly 75% say they have been passed over – or suspect they have been passed over – for an opportunity because they lacked a specific degree or credential.

Workers are also willing to demonstrate their capabilities. Nine in 10 would take a fair skills assessment to formally document their strengths.

The most revealing finding may be among the minority who would not. 'No incentive' is the most common reason, cited by more than a third – ahead of privacy concerns or fear that the results could negatively affect their career.

The implication is important for internal mobility: collecting skills data alone isn't enough. Employees need to see that demonstrating their capabilities creates access to real development and career opportunities.

The data

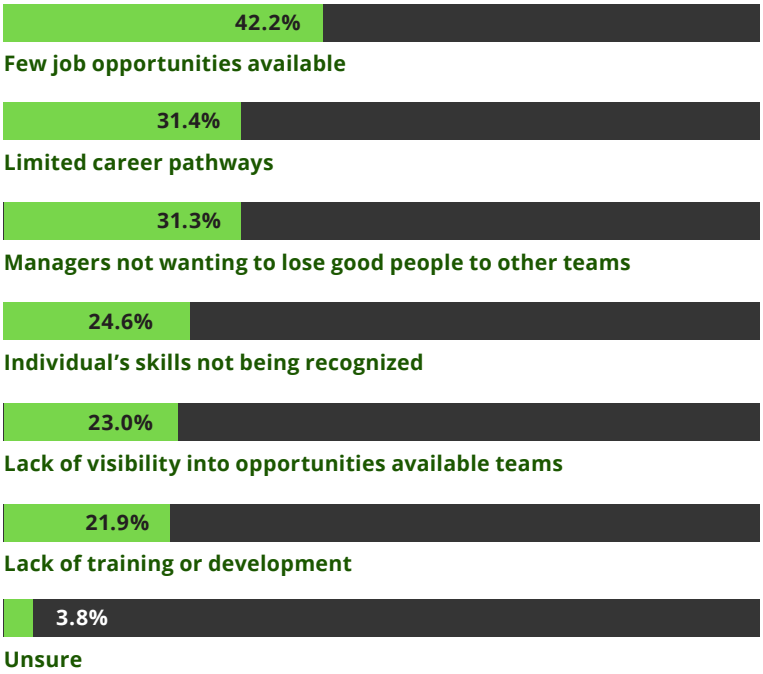
- **61.3%** believe employers should remove degree requirements for most or almost all jobs
- **53.8%** have been passed over and **21.0%** suspect they were passed over, because they lacked a specific degree
- **89.0%** would take an objective skills assessment to formally document their strengths; **90.8%** of US workers stated they would complete a test compared to **87.2%** of UK workers
- Among those unwilling to take an assessment, **36.5%** say it is because there is no incentive to do so

The takeaway for HR

Skills-based mobility only works when employees can see the value of participating. Objective skills data needs to connect directly to development and progression. Employees are willing to take assessments and want to demonstrate their skills and capabilities if it brings greater transparency to opportunities within their organization.

Workforce perceptions

The obstacles preventing mobility in their organizations



Development is being discussed, but opportunities in other roles are not

Employees are being encouraged to learn, but internal opportunity isn't being discussed often enough

For talent mobility to work, employees need more than skills. They need regular conversations that help them understand how their capabilities connect to future roles, career goals and new opportunities inside their team and the wider organization.

Managers are also the group most likely to encourage skill-building. More than 2 in 5 workers say managers frequently encourage them to learn new skills, compared with company leadership and HR.

When workers do speak with their manager, the conversations tend to focus more on strengths, development and learning aspirations, rather than on mobility itself. Nearly half of respondents say they have discussed their skills, strengths and development with their manager in the last one to five months, 43% say they have discussed learning aspirations, and a similar proportion have discussed career development and what progress looks like. But just a third have discussed other job opportunities within the organization in that same timeframe, while 1 in 7 say they have never had that conversation.

The findings suggest most organizations are more comfortable discussing growth than movement or career goals.

When it comes to AI, there is a similar development pattern with nearly half of workers saying their company is introducing AI tools, while 2 in 5 say their employer is providing AI skills training as well as training to use specific AI tools. However, fewer – around 1 in 4 – say their organization is redesigning jobs or processes around AI capabilities, facilitating knowledge-sharing events, or creating forums for sharing tips and ideas.

In other words, organizations are making AI available and helping employees use it – but are doing less to embed that learning into broader career development, workforce redesign and internal mobility.

The data

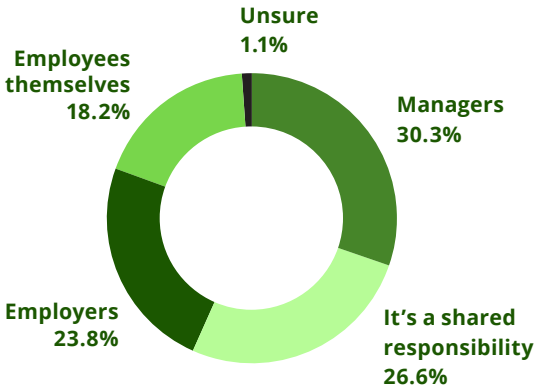
- **30.3%** say managers are most responsible for helping workers learn new skills or upskill as jobs evolve
- **43.0%** say managers frequently encourage skill-building, compared with **40.3%** for leadership and **30.4%** for HR
- **48.1%** have discussed skills, strengths and development with their manager in the last 1–5 months, **43.3%** discussed learning aspirations but only **35.0%** have discussed other job opportunities within the organization
- **13.9%** say they have never had a conversation with their manager about other job opportunities within the organization
- **48.7%** say their employer is introducing AI tools and **42.2%** are receiving AI skills training, but only **24.1%** say jobs or processes are being redesigned around AI capabilities

The takeaway for HR

For talent mobility to become a reality, organizations need to go further with development – connecting learning to visible internal opportunities, better career conversations and a clearer view of where people could go next. Employees are being encouraged to build skills, and many organizations are investing in AI training. But development alone does not guarantee mobility.

Workforce perceptions

Who should own skill development as jobs evolve?



AI could become an engine for talent mobility

Workers want AI to help them adapt but full trust remains low

AI is already a routine part of work for the people surveyed: 3 in 5 use AI tools daily and more than a third use them weekly. But adoption doesn't mean unquestioning confidence.

Nearly 1 in 4 fully trust AI outputs at work, even though the vast majority, (80%), trust them at least somewhat. Meanwhile, nearly 2 in 3 say AI has increased the pressure to be constantly productive.

When it comes to careers, however, employees show considerable appetite for AI-enabled support with 3 in 4 indicating they would be very or somewhat willing to use an AI-powered career coach to help them leverage their skills for growth.

Workers also favor adaptation over displacement. If AI significantly changed their role in the next six to twelve months, nearly half would prefer to be retrained for a different role – the most popular response, ahead of redeployment, reduced responsibility or redundancy. Interestingly, most workers think AI will take over many people manager responsibilities within ten years.

For employers, that creates an opportunity to use AI not simply to automate tasks, but to help identify adjacent skills, development needs and possible career moves.

The data

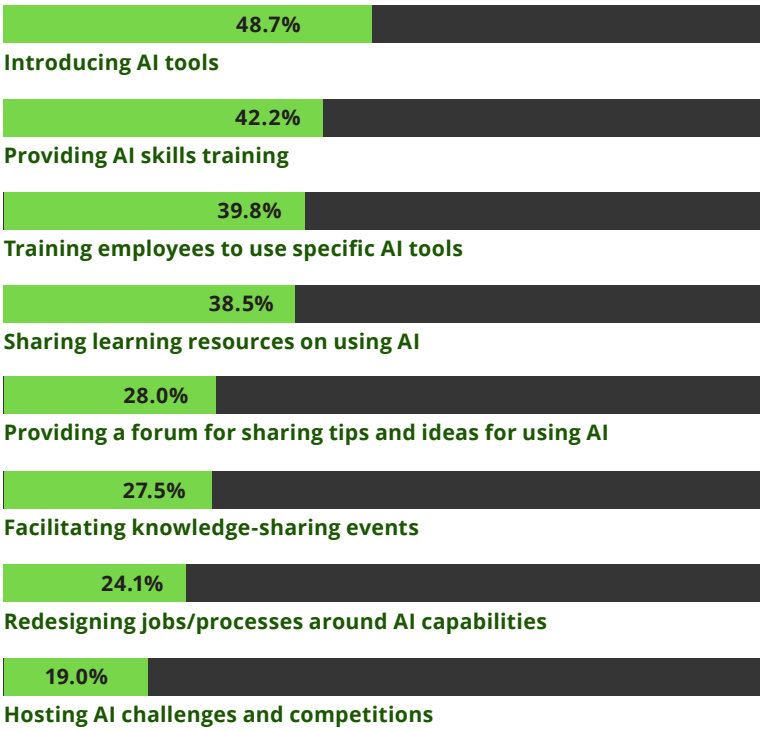
- **58.7%** use AI tools at work daily; **34.2%** use them weekly
- Only **23.7%** fully trust AI outputs, although **80.4%** trust them at least somewhat
- **75.2%** would use an AI-powered career coach
- **46.5%** would prefer retraining for a different role if AI significantly changed their current role
- **62.0%** think AI is likely to take over many responsibilities currently performed by their direct manager within 10 years

The takeaway for HR

AI's role in talent mobility may be most valuable when it helps organizations and employees understand capability, identify next moves and target development – with objective data and human judgement remaining central to consequential talent decisions.

Workforce perceptions

How organization are investing in AI to support people in their jobs



The rise of ‘AI Rebounding’

Some workers say organizations are bringing people back after AI replacement

One of the most striking findings is the emergence of ‘AI Rebounding’: workers reporting that employees have been laid off or replaced by AI and later asked to return by the same employer.

Nearly 1 in 6 workers say this has happened to them personally. More than 1 in 5 know someone it has happened to, while 1 in 7 say they have heard of it – meaning half of all workers have some connection to the phenomenon.

The experience is more commonly reported in the US: nearly 1 in 5 US workers say it happened to them personally, compared with 1 in 8 in the UK.

If asked back, employees expect the relationship to change. Half of workers would want a significant pay increase, more than 40% would want written job-security guarantees and a similar amount would want full transparency about how AI would be used in their role. Fewer than 1 in 10 say they would refuse to return under any circumstances.

The finding raises a wider question about workforce planning: whether organizations understand the full value of human skills, experience and judgement before deciding which work can be automated.

The data

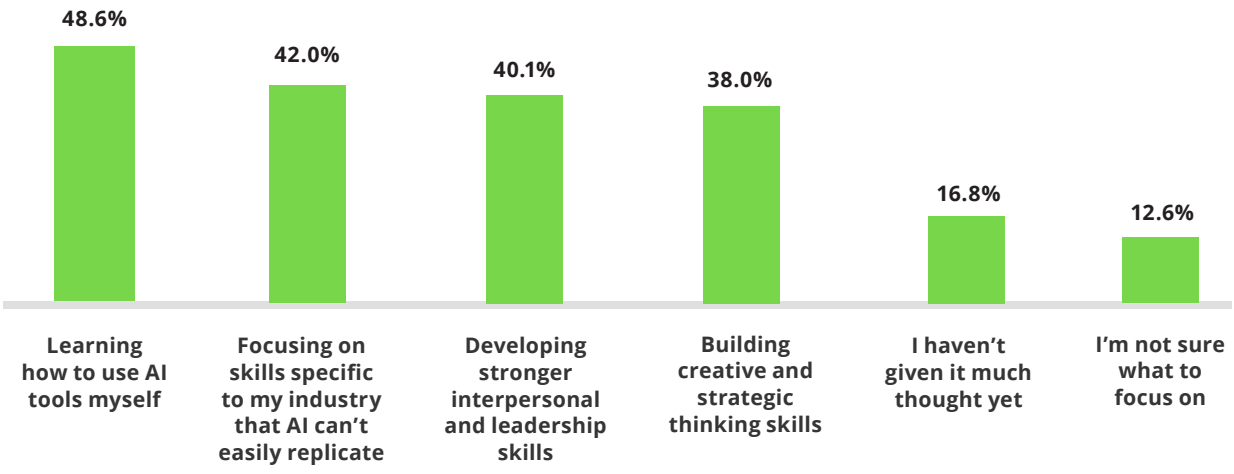
- **16.0%** say they personally experienced being replaced by AI and later asked back
- **22.6%** know someone this happened to and **13.8%** have heard of it
- **19.1%** of US workers report experiencing it personally, compared with **12.8%** in the UK
- **50.8%** would want a significant pay increase before returning
- **42.2%** would want written job-security guarantees
- **39.7%** would want full transparency about how AI would be used in their role

The takeaway for HR

AI Rebounding may be an early warning against treating automation as a simple substitute for people. Understanding skills, potential and the human contribution to work is critical before roles are redesigned or removed.

Workforce perceptions

Development employees are prioritizing to stay relevant in an AI-changing job market



Conclusion

You already have the talent you need, the challenge is seeing it

For years, organizations have responded to skills shortages by looking outward: recruiting more people, competing harder for scarce skills and searching for new sources of talent.

The findings in this research point to an equally important opportunity inside the organization.

Employees are willing to learn. They are willing to retrain. They want to understand where their skills could take them next, yet many still believe they will need to leave their employer to progress.

Closing that talent mobility gap requires employers to understand people beyond job titles and credentials – creating a clearer, more objective view of skills and potential, and connecting that insight to development and real career opportunities.

The organizations best positioned for the future will be those that can see, develop and mobilize the talent they already have.

Insight to Action

Five implications for talent mobility at work
With nearly 4 in 5 workers saying the promise of career advancement increases fulfilment and engagement, HR should make mobility part of every employee experience. Meaningful conversations with managers and visible pathways to growth are powerful levers for both mobility and retention.

1. Make workforce skills visible
Internal mobility starts with knowing what people can do beyond their current job title. Organizations need a reliable and objective view of skills and potential across the workforce.

2. Turn visibility into opportunity
84% want to know which internal roles match their skills. Make career pathways easier to see and connect people with opportunities before they conclude progression means leaving.

3. Use objective assessment to make better mobility decisions
Mobility opportunities shouldn't depend on who has the most visible profile, the strongest relationship with their manager or the right credentials. Objective assessment gives organizations – and employees – consistent evidence of skills, capability and potential, helping identify people who might otherwise be overlooked and providing leaders greater confidence in internal talent decisions.

4. Equip managers with data, not just instinct
Actionable talent data enables managers to fully understand the broad skills and capabilities of their team, driving more meaningful development conversations that align to real business needs and mobility opportunities.

5. Use AI to unlock mobility, not determine it
AI can help surface adjacent skills, career possibilities and development needs at scale, but this technology should not be used in isolation, organizations must ensure any people decisions are grounded in transparent, objective evidence and human judgement.

Find out more about how SHL can help you uncover true skills and move talent with the speed of change, **visit shl.com/talent-mobility**

Methodology

About the research

SHL's "At Work" series explores the forces reshaping the relationship between people and work. Each year, we ask workers what they're experiencing now – across skills, careers, hiring and technology – to help leaders and organizations prepare for what comes next in the future of work.

SHL commissioned Propeller Insights to survey workers in the United States and United Kingdom about their experiences and perceptions of skills, hiring, career development, internal mobility, careers and AI at work.

SHL's Workforce Perspectives Survey 2026 explored work-related experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of employed people across different demographics and industries.

- **Total respondents:** 2,036 working age adults
  - 1,029 (50.5%) reside in the US
  - 1,007 (49.5%) reside in the UK
- **Field period:** June-July 2026
- **Research partner:** Propeller Insights, a market research firm based in Los Angeles, commissioned by SHL
- The survey combined closed-ended multiple-choice questions with attitudinal Likert scales and limited open-text responses to capture sentiment
- **Sampling method:** Online quantitative survey using a nationally representative panel of employed adults aged 18–65+ years across the US and UK reflecting workforce demographics
- **Margin of error:** 5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level

Respondent Profile

- **Employment status:** Full-time employees, part-time workers, self-employed, freelancer, and military personnel
- **Age (years):** 18–24 (9.9%), 25-34 (22.1%), 35–44 (20.6%), 45–54 (21.4%), 55-64 (19.8%), 65+ (6.2%)
- **Gender identity:** Representative balance of male (50.0%), female (49.7%), transgender (0.2%), and non-conforming respondents (0.1%)
- **Job function:** Respondents represented a diverse mix of business functions, spanning technology, HR, sales and commercial, legal, finance, operations, administration and professional services
- **Level within the organization:** Entry-level (8.6%), Associate (18.2%), Specialist (12.2%), Manager / Senior Manager (38.5%), Director / Senior Director (10.9%), Vice President / SVP / EVP (2.2%), President (0.6%), and C-Level / Partner / Owner (8.8%)
- **Size of organizations (number of employees):** 1-10 (5.3%), 11-50 (12.7%), 51-200 (21.2%), 201-500 (16.4%), 501-1,000 (16.6%), 1,001-5,000 (13.5%), and more than 5,000 (14.4%)
- I**ndustries:** Accounting (4.2%), Banking, Financial Services and Insurance (8.5%), Construction (6.4%), Education, Government and Public Sector (10.2%), Healthcare (Physical & Mental) & Life Sciences (11.5%), Manufacturing (7.3%), Retail (7.3%), Technology (13.7%), Other (6.3%)

Limitations: As with all online surveys, responses rely on self-reporting and may be influenced by social-desirability bias. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding or multi-select questions. The findings are intended to represent attitudes and perceptions of the workforce.

SHL's At Work research series the forces reshaping people's experiences of work — and what they mean for how organizations hire, develop and mobilize talent. Find out more at shl.com/at-work

Data breakdown by country

Exact survey percentages to one decimal place

OVERALL	US	UK	Key finding:	
Talent Mobility and Career Advancement				Page 3
66.4%	66.7%	65.9%	Believe they'll need to leave employer to advance	
84.4%	83.8%	85.0%	Want visibility of internal opportunities	
82.5%	85.5%	79.6%	Would retrain/reskill for a senior role	
81.6%	82.4%	80.7%	Would retrain/reskill for a different role	
41.2%	40.2%	42.2%	Value skills opportunity over than job title when evaluating a job offer	
19.4%	21.1%	17.8%	Job title/status matters more than skills gained	
78.4%	80.2%	76.4%	Career advancement increases fulfilment and engagement (agree)	
Skills Visibility and the Hidden Workforce				Page 4
41.8%	47.5%	35.9%	Manager fully understands wider skills	
54.3%	59.1%	49.4%	Employer favors external hiring over reskilling/promoting internal talent	
21.7%	19.5%	23.8%	Skills are not fully utilized	
41.5%	43.8%	39.6%	Underutilized: role does not provide opportunities to use skills	
19.5%	18.9%	20.0%	Underutilized: manager is unaware of skills	
Skills, Credentials and Assessment				Page 5
61.3%	61.3%	61.2%	Support dropping degree requirements for most/almost all jobs	
53.8%	58.8%	48.6%	Have been passed over due to degree/credential	
89.0%	90.8%	87.2%	Would complete a formal skills assessment	
36.5%	34.1%	38.3%	Unwilling assessment: no incentive	
42.2%	39.9%	44.5%	Top mobility obstacle: few job opportunities available	
Development, Managers and Career Conversations				Page 6
30.3%	31.3%	29.3%	Managers seen as most responsible for upskilling	
43.0%	46.0%	39.9%	Manager frequently encourages skill-building	
40.3%	44.0%	36.5%	Leadership frequently encourages skill-building	
30.4%	32.5%	28.3%	HR frequently encourages skill-building	
48.1%	50.4%	45.7%	Discussed skills/strengths/development with manager in last 1-5 months	
43.3%	43.8%	42.7%	Discussed learning aspirations with manager in last 1-5 months	
41.3%	43.0%	39.5%	Discussed career development/progress with manager in last 1-5 months	
35.0%	38.3%	31.6%	Discussed other job opportunities in organization in last 1-5 months	
13.9%	10.7%	17.2%	Never discussed other job opportunities in organization with manager	
Organizational AI Investment				Page 7
48.7%	46.4%	51.0%	Organization introducing AI tools	
42.2%	42.0%	42.4%	Organization providing AI skills training	
39.8%	38.1%	41.6%	Organization training employees to use specific AI tools	
24.1%	26.4%	21.7%	Organization redesigning jobs/processes around AI capabilities	
27.5%	29.4%	25.5%	Organization facilitates AI knowledge-sharing events	
28.0%	27.8%	28.3%	Organization provides AI tips/ideas forum	
AI, Trust and Career Mobility				Page 7
58.7%	60.0%	57.5%	Use AI tools daily	
34.2%	33.0%	35.5%	Use AI tools weekly	
23.7%	27.7%	19.6%	Fully trust AI outputs	
80.4%	79.8%	81.0%	Trust AI outputs at least somewhat	
63.3%	63.9%	62.5%	AI has increased pressure to stay productive	
75.2%	77.7%	72.7%	Would use an AI-powered career coach	
46.5%	47.4%	45.5%	Would prefer retraining if AI significantly changed their role	
62.0%	63.9%	60.1%	Believe AI likely to take over many direct manager responsibilities within 10 years	
AI Rebounding				Page 8
16.0%	19.1%	12.8%	Personally experienced AI Rebounding	
22.6%	23.6%	21.6%	Know someone who experienced AI Rebounding	
13.8%	12.1%	15.6%	Have heard about AI Rebounding	
52.4%	54.8%	50.0%	Have some connection to AI Rebounding	
50.8%	49.4%	52.2%	Would want significant pay increase to return after AI replacement	
42.2%	43.0%	41.4%	Would want written job-security guarantees	
39.7%	40.4%	39.0%	Would want full transparency on AI use in role	
7.7%	6.6%	8.7%	Would not return under any circumstances	
48.1%	44.3%	52.0%	Top AI-market relevance priority: learning how to use AI tools	

Additional Data Breakdown by Gender

Notable Finding Data Point/s	Women	Men
Women are more likely to support dropping degree requirements	64.3%	58.4%
Women are more likely to say credentials have held them back	58.7%	49.5%
Women show greater willingness to prove their skills objectively	91.8%	86.6%
Women are more open to AI-powered career coaching	79.7%	71.8%
Women feel greater productivity pressure from AI	67.0%	59.8%
Women are more likely to expect AI to take over management responsibilities	64.6%	59.0%

Additional Data Breakdown by Age

Notable Finding	Data Point/s
Internal mobility appears to slow significantly with age	56.3% of 25–34s were offered an internal move in the past year and took it, while 73.0% of 65+ were not offered an internal move
Younger workers are experiencing much faster career movement	40.1% of 25–34s were promoted 6–12 months ago, while 58.7% of 65+ say their last promotion was 2+ years ago
Young workers are seeing AI displacement first-hand	23.8% of 18–24s say they personally experienced being replaced by AI and later asked back
AI Rebounding is highly visible among younger workers	35.6% of 18–24s personally know someone who was replaced by AI and later rehired
AI is already routine for the youngest workers	65.9% of 18–24s use AI daily at work; 46.0% of 65+ use it weekly
Career priorities shift markedly with age	25.2% of 18–24s prioritize higher pay; 24.1% of 25–34s prioritize work-life balance; 27.4% of 45–54s prioritize job security

About SHL

SHL provides trusted Talent Intelligence that empowers organisations to make confident, data-driven people decisions. Built on 45+ years of expertise, SHL combines proven behavioural science, predictive analytics and transparent AI to deliver objective, actionable insights across the talent lifecycle - from hiring and development to internal mobility.

Find out more about SHL's At Work research series

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