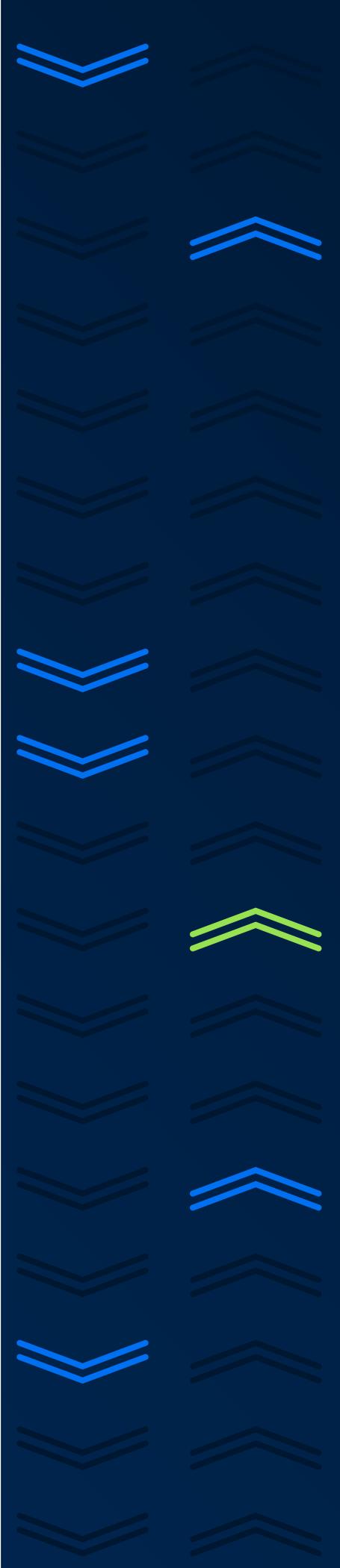


An Interesting Case: Leadership

A report by UpSkill America commissioned by
Western Governors University.

Authors: Haley Glover, senior director, UpSkill America;
Angie Napper Walker, director, WGU General Education

This report is one of five on durable skills produced by
UpSkill America for WGU.



Introduction

Few skills are as widely discussed and as variably defined as leadership. It is the focus of academic and professional programs, is listed in job descriptions, and often appears in performance reviews. But in the context of early-career hiring, how much weight does it actually carry?

In early summer 2025, with support from Western Governors University, UpSkill America had the opportunity to dig deeper into durable skills and attitudes to gain a better understanding of how U.S. employers value and prioritize these capacities in their early-career hires.

While we included leadership as a discrete durable skill in our analysis for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of how employers viewed it, we know that many people view leadership not as a single skill but as an aggregation of many attributes. We also understand that clarity about what employers mean when they prioritize leadership can be useful for education providers and early-career candidates.

This brief — based on findings from our survey of over 550 employers across the U.S., representing all 50 states and every sector, industry, and organization size — focuses on understanding how leadership is prioritized alongside other durable skills.

Where Does Leadership Rank Among Other Durable Skills?

According to our survey, 140 respondents, about 25%, rated leadership as “extremely important” for early-career hires. This places leadership in the middle-to-lower range of overall skill priorities. In contrast, skills like teamwork/collaboration and ethical behavior rank at the top, with more than half of employers indicating they are “extremely important.”

This doesn't mean that employers don't value leadership. What we believe it means is that employers are pragmatic about where and when leadership emerges. Leadership appears to be viewed by employers as a developmental skill, something to be cultivated over time rather than expected on day one.

As described in our larger paper, employers appear to most value “reliability and execution” core skills and attitudes for early-career hires. These are the “non-negotiables” for early-career talent, focusing on consistent, dependable performance and execution of role tasks.

Among the quarter of survey respondents who put a high value on leadership, we observe the following patterns:

- **Organizational size:** Larger firms with structured management hierarchies place more emphasis on leadership as a day-one skill.
- **Industry context:** Sectors such as public administration and educational services rate leadership higher than manufacturing or retail.
- **Hiring philosophy:** Employers who hire primarily for attitude and “fit” are more likely to prioritize leadership for early-career hires.

Among these organizations, though, we see the same patterns of emphasis on the reliability and execution core, suggesting that employers value leadership as a complement to those skills, not as a standalone or separately developed capability.

Interestingly, among employers who indicate that leadership is “extremely important,” 14.3% say that new hires “always” meet their expectations, substantially higher than the average across all employers (6.9%). Employers who do not prioritize leadership are much less likely to say that new hires “always” meet their expectations: only 4.2% of that population expressed extreme satisfaction with their early-career talent. While we don’t have qualitative data to fully explain these differences, we can infer that employers who prioritize leadership might foster environments where new hires are allowed or encouraged to stretch in their roles. These employers may also be better at recognizing and rewarding the often understated work that keeps cultures intact, such as mentoring, working independently, and taking initiative, which are often demonstrations of leadership.

Based on our survey data, employers appear to see leadership as something to grow, not something to screen for.

These insights carry practical implications for educators and workforce programs.

Educators

- Consider positioning leadership as a growth trajectory rather than a static accomplishment. Rather than asking a student whether they are a leader, ask whether they are on the path to becoming one and how they demonstrate leadership in their lives.
- Emphasize that leadership is not a standalone trait. It is most valued when combined with high-priority skills and attitudes identified in the reliability and execution core.

Employers

- Develop work-based learning experiences that allow interns, apprentices, and new hires to demonstrate leadership capacities, even outside formal roles.
- Adapt hiring and performance considerations, encourage candidates and employees to describe situations in which they influenced outcomes or supported others as demonstrations of leadership, rather than framing questions about when they were “in charge.”

Our findings here lead us to be thoughtful about “leadership” as a skill. As many already understand, leadership is highly contextualized. Becoming a good leader is a trajectory that never ends: one does not simply become a leader, and great leaders never stop striving to become better leaders.