From Execution To Influence: The Durable Skills That Define Senior Roles

A report by UpSkill America commissioned by Western Governors University.

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Introduction

In early summer 2025, with support from Western Governors University, UpSkill America had the opportunity to delve 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.

In addition to identifying early-career hiring priorities, we analyzed how employers evaluate durable skills differently when hiring or promoting for more senior roles. According to our survey, more than 60% of respondents indicate that they value and prioritize specific skills and attitudes differently when considering senior-level positions.

Which Skills Are Most Differently Evaluated for Senior Roles?

Across all respondents, the skills most frequently cited as evaluated differently for senior roles include:

- Leadership: Builds a collaborative, inclusive, and positive team culture to meet goals and objectives.

- Analytical thinking: Examines information critically and fairly, and solves problems based on that information and in alignment with goals and objectives.

- Critical thinking: Applies logical reasoning to real-world problems; draws logical conclusions from analysis; makes decisions based on analysis.

- Active listening: Absorbs information by listening attentively, understanding what is transmitted, and storing information for later purposes.

- Communication: Demonstrates the ability to clearly convey ideas and information, as appropriate to the situation; adapts communication style to the audience.

- Ethical behavior/integrity: Applies ethical concepts and behaviors to complex situations; acts in alignment with core values, even in the face of pressure or temptation.

- Creative problem solving: Approaches problems with new and different perspectives, strategies, mindsets and data; evaluates the results of creative solutions.

- Teamwork/collaboration: Engages respectfully and cooperatively with others to achieve shared goals; takes part in activities that benefit the success of a group of colleagues.

- Attention to detail: Performs tasks with accuracy and attention to detail.

- Conflict mitigation: Handles disagreements and mediates conflicts in a respectful, appropriate, and impartial manner.

- Managing uncertainty: Demonstrates the ability to act and make thoughtful progress in the absence of clarity and in ambiguous conditions.

There is strong alignment here with the highest-priority skills employers seek in early-career roles, suggesting that reliability and high-quality performance expectations do not diminish as people climb the corporate ladder. We see greater priority placed on reasoning skills for senior hires, reflecting increasing responsibility

for interpreting, evaluating, and making decisions, often in uncertain conditions. Interpersonal skills are also important, reflecting the people-management responsibilities inherent in senior positions.

Leadership is also a much more important skill for senior hires than for early-career roles. As noted in an earlier paper, leadership is not a high-priority skill in early-career roles, but it appears to be the defining expectation in senior roles.

Industry-Specific Patterns

Every industry prioritizes leadership and reasoning skills, like analytical and critical thinking, but secondary emphases vary. Customer-facing industries stress adaptability and communication, while regulated industries prioritize ethical behavior. Production environments prioritize teamwork and collaboration.

- **Accommodations and food services:** Top skills for senior hires include creative problem-solving, leadership, communication, managing uncertainty, and critical thinking. Senior roles prioritize problem-solving and adaptability, reflecting a fast-paced, customer-facing industry where real-time solutions matter.

- **Education:** Senior role skills include leadership, communication, critical thinking, analytical thinking, and ethical behavior/integrity. Education leaders constantly balance academic standards with public accountability. Trust, fairness, and sound leadership matter in senior education positions.

- **Finance and insurance:** Top skills for senior roles include leadership, analytical thinking, critical thinking, ethical behavior/integrity, and communication. These industries operate in high-stakes regulatory environments, where failures in ethics or reasoning expose the organization to reputational and legal risk.

- **Health care:** Top skills for senior roles include leadership, communication, analytical thinking, ethical behavior, and critical thinking. As in finance, health care places a premium on ethics and sound reasoning at senior levels. Unlike finance, health care ranks communication even more highly, reflecting demands for strong interpersonal engagement in senior roles.

- **Manufacturing:** Senior role priorities include leadership, analytical thinking, communication, critical thinking, and teamwork/collaboration. Manufacturing organizations need higher-order reasoning and people-management skills.

Organization Size Insights

The larger the organization, the more employers value ethics, decision-making, and systems thinking among senior roles. In smaller organizations, employers tend to value high-level communication and interpersonal skills.

- Smaller organizations (under 100 employees) prioritize leadership, communications, analytical thinking, critical thinking, and active listening. Small businesses appear to need hands-on leadership from senior hires, both in setting the organization's direction and in directly engaging with clients and employees.

- Mid-size organizations (100 – 1,000 employees) prioritize similar skills as smaller companies. They also elevate teamwork and collaboration, as well as flexibility and adaptability. These companies are large enough to require structured management, but still small enough to need adaptable leaders who collaborate effectively with their teams.

- Large organizations (5,000+ employees) consistently emphasize leadership, analytical thinking, critical thinking, communication, and ethical behavior/integrity. Organizations at this scale are complex, managing risk and reputation. Leaders must interpret data, make trade-offs, and model integrity for thousands of people. Ethics and reasoning matter more than teamwork or flexibility, which may be delegated down the chain of command.

Hiring Philosophy Influence

In our survey, we asked employers to define their hiring philosophies, specifically identifying whether they primarily hired for job skills, later focusing on building alignment with corporate culture, or whether they hired for attitude and fit, later focusing on developing job skills. About 60% of employers say they hire for skills, while 40% say they hire for fit. Both philosophies prioritize leadership. Fit-first companies prioritize communication- and relationship-driven skills among senior hires, while job-skills focused employers prioritize reasoning and ethics.

- Employers prioritizing skills focus on leadership, analytical thinking, critical thinking, communication, and ethical behavior/integrity. These organizations trust that employees will develop interpersonal and cultural fit after they're hired. By the time they're senior, what matters most is judgment, reasoning, and ethical leadership.
- Employers prioritizing attitudes and cultural fit prioritize leadership, communication, critical thinking, analytical thinking, and active listening. At senior levels, employers focusing on fit tend to double down on relationship and communications capacities. Listening rises as a differentiator.

Rising Expectations

The analysis of employer priorities reveals that the skills that differentiate senior roles from entry-level positions are both technical and interpersonal, involving judgment, influence, and responsibility. Across industries, organization sizes, and hiring philosophies, leadership emerges as the most significant skill that employers evaluate differently for senior hires. People in senior roles manage teams, set vision, build trust, and create the conditions for success. This skill shifts most dramatically from early-career roles, where leadership is rarely required, to senior roles, where it is non-negotiable.

Surrounding leadership are two other nearly universal priorities among the employers we surveyed: analytical and critical thinking, and communication. Senior roles demand the ability to reason through complexity, weigh competing priorities, and act decisively in ambiguous conditions. Employers expect thoughtful judgment and sound decisions that have a ripple effect across the organization. At the same time, senior hires must communicate those judgments persuasively, listening to stakeholders, building consensus, and navigating conflict.

Beyond these broad consistencies, the patterns diverge. Industries reflect their environments. Service-heavy sectors require leaders who can respond in real time to customer-facing challenges, elevating adaptability and creative problem-solving. Regulated industries such as finance and health care elevate ethical behavior alongside reasoning, recognizing that poor decisions can expose organizations to risk. Production-focused sectors such as manufacturing emphasize teamwork and structured communication, signaling the need to coordinate complex processes and people.

Organization size also shapes expectations. In smaller firms, senior leaders are close to the front lines and must rely on active listening, flexibility, and clear communication. They "wear many hats," serving as both decision-makers and direct collaborators. As organizations grow larger, the emphasis shifts. Senior leaders in larger

firms face fewer expectations to be flexible operators, with higher expectations to act as stewards of systems and guardians against reputational risk.

Taken together, these findings offer a picture of how employers view the progression of durable skills from entry-level to senior roles. The movement is not linear; it's layered. What is expected among early-career hires — reliability, execution, and task focus — expands into more complex expectations of leadership, judgment, and influence. Employers are clear that technical expertise is insufficient to sustain career growth. What distinguishes senior hires is the ability to think, decide, and lead with integrity while motivating others through effective communication and trust.

For educators, these patterns point to the necessity of scaffolding the development of durable skills across the curriculum, moving students from execution to reasoning to leadership. For employers, they reinforce the importance of investing in leadership pipelines that develop not only technical managers but ethical, communicative, and adaptable leaders.

For learners themselves, understanding how employers' priorities for durable skills change based on the level of the role can be a helpful frame. Mastery of reliability and execution core skills may open the first door, but mastery of judgment and influence is what can create ladders within organizations.

Appendix: Skills and Definitions

- Active Listening - Absorbs information by listening attentively, understanding what is transmitted, and storing information for later purposes.

- Analytical Thinking - Examines information critically and fairly, and solves problems based on that information and in alignment with goals and objectives.

- Attention to Detail - Performs tasks with accuracy and attention to detail.

- Communication - Demonstrates ability to clearly convey ideas and information as appropriate for a given situation; adapts communication style to an audience.

- Conflict Mitigation - Handles disagreements and mediates conflicts in a respectful, appropriate, and impartial manner.

- Creative Problem Solving - Approaches problems with new and different perspectives, strategies, mindsets and data; evaluates the results of creative solutions.

- Critical Thinking - Applies logical reasoning to real-world problems; draws logical conclusions from analysis; makes decisions based on analysis.

- Curiosity/Intellectual Engagement - Approaches opportunities to learn and grow with openness and a desire to understand; seeks learning opportunities proactively and with enthusiasm.

- Customer Service - Supports customer/client needs and expectations.

- Ethical Behavior/Integrity - Applies ethical concepts and behaviors to complex situations; acts in alignment with core values, even in the face of pressure or temptation.

- Flexibility/Adaptability - Demonstrates flexibility in mindsets, behaviors, and plans in response to evolving circumstancess

- Inclusion - Promotes belonging by actively welcoming and valuing the contributions of all people; respects differing beliefs, identities, and experiences.

- Initiative - Assesses situations and takes appropriate action and makes decisions without supervision/direction.

- Leadership - Builds a collaborative, inclusive, and positive team culture to meet goals and objectives.

- Managing Uncertainty - Demonstrate the ability to act and make thoughtful progress in the absence of clarity and in ambiguous conditions.

- Metacognition - Demonstrates awareness and understanding of one's own knowledge, thinking, strengths, and weaknesses; assesses one's own work objectively recognizes and resists one's own cognitive biases.

- Perseverance/Resilience - Demonstrates commitment to goals despite adversity; recovers from setbacks.

- Self-Direction - Demonstrates ownership of one's own learning, consistently pursuing growth; manages time, resources, and commitments with accountability and discipline.

- Teamwork/Collaboration - Engages respectfully and cooperatively with others to achieve shared goals; takes part in activities that benefit the success of a group of colleagues.

Attitude Definitions

- Advocacy - Uses one's voice and position to stand up for oneself and others.

- Emotional Intelligence - Demonstrates social and emotional intelligence skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

- Empathy/Compassion - Relates to others with emotional understanding and responds with kindness and respect.

- Gratitude - Cultivates appreciation and expresses thanks in ways that strengthen relationships and morale.

- Growth Mindset - Acts with a belief that abilities and intelligence can be gained through learning and hard work, rather than being fixed traits.

- Humility - Recognizes one's own limitations and values the contributions of others.

- Justice - Acts with fairness to ensure equitable treatment of all.

- Optimism - Demonstrates confidence that positive outcomes are possible and that setbacks are temporary and able to be overcome.

- Patience - Remains calm and respectful in the face of frustration or delay.

- Responsibility - Takes accountability for one's own actions and for making positive change; stands firm in one's values.

- Sense of Purpose - Acts with a sense of mission, aligning actions with values.

- Service Orientation - Prioritizes the well-being and needs of others, showing empathy, respect, and a willingness to contribute meaningfully to individual and collective success.

- Trustworthiness - Acts with integrity and earns the trust of others through consistent honesty and reliability.