

What Matters Most: Employer Priorities For Early-Career Talent

A report by UpSkill America commissioned by
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An Analysis by Organization Type and Market Reach

Employers agree that durable skills and attitudes are essential for success in early-career roles. But what they mean by “essential” depends on who they are, what they do, and how they operate. A global financial firm doesn’t hire the same way as a local nonprofit, and a public agency doesn’t evaluate new hires with the same lens as a tech startup.

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.

This piece draws on our national survey data to examine how hiring priorities shift based on organization sector (e.g., government, publicly traded companies, private firms) and market reach (e.g., local, national, global). The findings reveal how skills and attitudes are prioritized in different organizational contexts, as well how these preferences are tied to broader differences in hiring strategies, degree requirements, views on personal development, and satisfaction with early-career talent.

Durable Skills Priorities by Organization Type

Across all sectors, we see strong alignment with the “reliability and execution” core skills and attitudes, which appear to represent the “non-negotiables” of early-career hiring, expected from day one of employment. These skills and attitudes include trustworthiness, attention to detail, responsibility, teamwork/collaboration, and ethical behavior/integrity. We have pulled out how employers from each sector have rated those core skills and shine a spotlight on the other skills and attitudes in the top tier for different types of employers.

For each of the skills and attitudes identified below, we include the proportion of relevant employers who indicate that attribute is “extremely important” for early-career roles.

For a comprehensive listing of durable skills and attitudes we evaluated, see the Appendix.

Publicly Traded Companies

Publicly traded companies emphasize precision, professionalism, and risk management. These firms tend to operate in high-stakes, high-visibility contexts, and prioritize skills and attitudes that support internal and external alignment to high standards. Seventy percent say they prioritize skills over attitudes when hiring, and employers in this sector are the most likely to say that early-career hires often fail to meet expectations.

Most Valued Durable Skills

- Creative problem solving (44%)
- Communications (44%)
- Customer service (43%)
- Analytical thinking (43%)
- Critical thinking (42%)

Most Valued Attitudes

- Service orientation (57%)
- Emotional intelligence (39%)
- Patience (36%)
- Growth mindset (33.8%)
- Sense of purpose (33%)

Privately Held Companies

Private companies share many behavioral preferences with their public counterparts, but their approach to hiring appears to be more relationship centered. They are more likely to value cultural fit, with a more even split between hiring for skill and hiring for attitude. They are also more likely than public companies to report that early-career hires meet expectations.

Most Valued Durable Skills

- Communication (65%)
- Critical thinking (57%)
- Customer service (45%)
- Analytical thinking (44%)
- Active listening (41%)

Most Valued Attitudes

- Growth mindset (53%)
- Service orientation (35%)
- Emotional intelligence (34%) –
- Patience (33%)
- Justice (32%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Publicly Traded Companies

- Trustworthiness (57%)
- Responsibility (56%)
- Attention to detail (52%)
- Ethical behavior/integrity (52%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (49%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Privately-Held Companies

- Trustworthiness (60%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (58%)
- Responsibility (57%)
- Attention to detail (54%)
- Ethical behavior/integrity (54%)

Government Employers

Government organizations tend to balance consistency and ethics. Their approach to hiring reflects concern for public accountability and service, alongside procedural compliance. They are more likely than employers in the private sector to hire for attitude over skill and typically require degrees from early-career hires for compliance, internal policy, or organizational preference.

Most Valued Durable Skills:

- Critical thinking (48%)
- Customer service (46%)
- Communication (44%)
- Analytical thinking (42%)
- Inclusion (42%)

Most Valued Attitudes:

- Growth mindset (46%)
- Justice (40%)
- Emotional intelligence (34%)
- Empathy/compassion (34%)
- Optimism (30%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Government Organizations

- Ethical behavior/integrity (62%)
- Attention to detail (56%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (56%)
- Responsibility (52%)
- Trustworthiness (46%)

Nonprofit Employers

Nonprofit organizations distinguish themselves through values-based missions and are often community-centered operations. Their priorities reflect this orientation, balancing operational effectiveness with deep attention to interpersonal and ethical behaviors. Their hiring patterns lean heavily toward **fit first**, with 72% indicating that they prioritize attitudes over skills at the point of hire.

Most Valued Durable Skills

- Communication (60%)
- Critical thinking (56%)
- Customer service (56%)
- Perseverance/resilience (46%)
- Active listening (42%)

Most Valued Attitudes

- Empathy/compassion (50%)
- Service orientation (60%)
- Patience (38%)
- Emotional intelligence (36%)
- Justice (32%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Nonprofit Organizations

- Ethical behavior/integrity (76%)
- Responsibility (58%)
- Trustworthiness (58%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (56%)
- Attention to detail (42%)

Reach Shapes Demand: Market Context Matters

Market and reach create different hiring demands, and different skill requirements for early career talent. Regardless of their markets, the employers we surveyed consistently elevate the reliability and execution core as their top-ranked skills and attitudes requirements.

Local and Regional Employers

Local firms prize visibility, reliability, and service. Employees are often the face of the company in the community, which places a premium on interpersonal skills and customer service.

Most Valued Skills

- Communication (52%)
- Customer service (51%)
- Critical thinking (40%)
- Inclusion (40%)
- Active listening (38%)

Most Valued Attitudes:

- Patience (42%)
- Service orientation (37%)
- Growth mindset (36%)
- Empathy/compassion (33%)
- Justice (33%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Local and Regional

- Ethical behavior/integrity (65%)
- Responsibility (59%)
- Trustworthiness (54%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (51%)
- Attention to detail (49%)

Multistate Employers

Organizations that span multiple states emphasize consistency and flexibility, prioritizing a mix of interpersonal, analytical, and customer-focused skills and attitudes.

Most Valued Skills

- Communication (59%)
- Critical thinking (53%)
- Customer service (51%)
- Analytical thinking (42%)
- Active listening (39%)

Most Valued Attitudes:

- Service orientation (45%)
- Justice (42%)
- Growth mindset (41%)
- Empathy (39%)
- Emotional intelligence (37%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Multistate Employers

- Responsibility (66%)
- Ethical behavior/integrity (63%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (62%)
- Trustworthiness (62%)
- Attention to detail (58%)

National (U.S.) Employers

National companies rely on large, often distributed workforces. They look for hires who can perform reliably and consistently across standardized systems and contribute to broader organizational goals.

Most Valued Skills

- Communication (56%)
- Critical thinking (46%)
- Analytical thinking (46%)
- Customer service (43%)
- Active listening (40%)

Most Valued Attitudes:

- Growth mindset (43%)
- Emotional intelligence (35%)
- Service orientation (35%)
- Patience (32%)
- Sense of purpose (32%)

Reliability and Execution Core: National Employers

- Attention to detail (57%)
- Trustworthiness (55%)
- Responsibility (55%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (55%)
- Ethical behavior/integrity (52%)

Global/Multinational Employers

For global firms, adaptability is non-negotiable. These companies seek early-career talent who can meet demanding standards while balancing complex environments, often operating across cultures and systems.

Most Valued Skills:

- Analytical thinking (47%)
- Creative problem solving (46%)
- Critical thinking (46%)
- Communication (44%)
- Customer service (43%)

Most Valued Attitudes:

- Emotional intelligence (38%)
- Service orientation (38%)
- Growth mindset (37%)
- Patience (33%)
- Justice (29%)

Reliability and Execution Core: Multistate Employers

- Trustworthiness (63%)
- Teamwork/collaboration (59%)
- Ethical Behavior/integrity (58%)
- Responsibility (54%)
- Attention to detail (48%)

Conclusion

This research shows how deeply hiring practices are rooted in an organization's structure, reach, and worldview. Whether an organization hires for skills or fit, requires degrees or not, believes attitudes are taught or caught, or feels satisfied with early-career talent, each reflects a larger set of internal conditions and priorities.

For educators, training providers, and career services teams — especially those supporting students in making decisions not just about what work they want to do, but the context in which they want to do it — it is our hope that this new information is helpful. Students will disperse across the economy, filling roles in organizations of all types and markets. Supporting them in understanding what those employers are looking for may help them make more informed decisions about where they land, and how they prepare.

For employers, we view these findings as contributing to the call for increased and expanded work-based learning opportunities for students. As they seek early career roles, their understanding of the durable skills and attitudes in demand by employers of all types will deepen through real-life learning experiences.

The labor market is not monolithic. It is segmented, philosophical, and deeply contextual. Understanding those contexts is key to developing more detailed roadmaps to readiness.

Appendix:

Skills 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 circumstances
- 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.