

Mind The Gaps: Opportunities For Improvement in Durable Skills and Attitudes Among Early-Career Hires

A report by UpSkill America commissioned by
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Introduction

In early summer 2025, with support from Western Governors University, [UpSkill America](#) had the opportunity to dig deeper into how U.S. employers value and prioritize durable skills and attitudes in their early-career hires.

In our national survey, we asked employers to identify which durable skills and attitudes are most frequently lacking in their early-career talent. Each of the following skills and attitudes was identified by employers as an “area for improvement.” The skill or attitude is named and defined.

Top durable skills cited as deficient:

- **Communication**

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

- **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.

- **Critical thinking**

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

- **Attention to detail**

Performs tasks with accuracy and attention to detail.

- **Creative problem solving**

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

Top attitudes identified as lacking:

- **Responsibility**

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

- **Growth mindset**

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

- **Emotional intelligence**

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

- **Trustworthiness**

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

- **Service orientation**

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

These skills and attitudes sit at the core of what makes employees effective, coachable, and promotable. More than that, they align almost entirely with the skills and attitudes that employers believe are most important in early-career roles.

Sector and Strategy: Context Matters

While the core deficiencies are consistent across the workforce, their relative prioritization varies by industry and by the organization's structure.

- **Health care and education** Employers are more likely than employers in other industries to report gaps in communication and empathy, reflecting the relational demands of patient and employee interactions.
- **Manufacturing and construction** Seemployers emphasize attention to detail and critical thinking, where small errors can have large consequences.
- **Retail and hospitality** employers highlight teamwork and service orientation, essential in fast-paced, customer-facing roles.

Organizational size also shapes how employers experience skill and attitude deficiencies.

- **Smaller organizations** (fewer than 500 employees) are more likely to identify gaps in customer-facing skills, particularly communication and service orientation. With leaner teams and direct community engagement, every interaction matters.
- **Large organizations** (5,000 to 25,000 employees) emphasize attention to detail and critical thinking, which are essential in complex systems where coordination and consistency drive performance.
- **Very large organizations** (25,000+ employees) are the most likely to report deficiencies in emotional intelligence and growth mindset, skills, and attitudes that may matter more as employees move across teams, collaborate at scale, and navigate organizational change.

Hiring Strategy Shapes the Gaps

Hiring philosophy appears to be highly aligned with how employers experience skill and attitude deficiencies.

- **Employers** who prioritize job skills during the hiring process and focus on fit after onboarding most often report post-hire gaps in attention to detail and critical thinking.
- **Employers** who hire based on attitudes and cultural alignment and build job skills later, more frequently identify deficiencies in growth mindset, emotional intelligence, and responsibility.

These patterns are not surprising. Employers who hire for job skills may have very specific standards and highly structured roles where attention to detail and critical thinking skills are essential. Employers who hire for culture may prioritize team players who can adapt in more flexible environments. These findings highlight that durable skills and attitudes are important to every employer, regardless of their industry, size, and hiring approach. Deprioritizing durable skills in education and training programs is short-sighted and puts early-career candidates at risk.

Making Attitudes Visible

While communication, collaboration, attention to detail, and even critical thinking skills are observable and assessable, attitudes like responsibility and growth mindset may be less so. Yet they appear to be just as important to employers and, overall, appear to be in shorter supply among early-career hires.

Responsibility was the most frequently cited deficiency among employers across all skills and attitudes, followed closely by growth mindset. These attitudes are less about what early-career hires do in their new roles, and more about how they show up in those roles. They're visible when a new hire takes ownership of tasks, responds well to feedback, persists through challenges, or seeks opportunities to improve, but they may never appear on a résumé.

Attitudes may be harder to measure, but they're impossible to ignore if they're absent. Current systems, including education and hiring systems, tend to prioritize attributes that can be measured — degrees, tests, presentations, simulations. Moving forward, however, to ensure that these high-priority gaps are addressed, attitudes should be elevated alongside durable skills as core qualifications. Integrating opportunities to intentionally develop and practice attitudes in curriculum and learning and work experiences will help early-career talent who are currently falling short.

Implications for Educators and Employers

For educators, the message is to stop treating these traits as a given. Communication, critical thinking, and responsibility must be intentionally named, developed, practiced, and assessed, not just mentioned in syllabi or addressed through group projects. Durable skills deserve the same rigor and attention as technical instruction.

For employers, align hiring practices with real performance expectations. If growth mindset, responsibility, and critical thinking matter — and our research shows they do — they must be named in position descriptions, screened for, developed, and reinforced. Onboarding programs should be structured to surface and strengthen these traits.

Working across sectors, we see great opportunities in expanding work-based learning programs. When structured intentionally, they offer low-risk, high-feedback environments where durable skills are surfaced, coached, and tested in real-world conditions.

Conclusion

We do not see evidence in our research that employers are dissatisfied in early-career talent. In fact, the majority indicate that new hires “always” or “usually” meet their expectations. Forty percent responded “sometimes,” and only 2.9% said “rarely.” Where they may be experiencing frustration is in unmet potential. They are eager for new talent who can show up, adapt, contribute, and grow, but often they find themselves coaching for basic reliability, navigating communication breakdowns, or rebuilding team cohesion after a mismatch in expectations.

We don’t need to guess at what matters. The gaps are clearly defined. The challenge now is ensuring that what we teach, what we measure, and what we reward all point in the same direction.

Appendix: Durable Skill 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.