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Center for

Career Readiness

*LeBow College of Business*

# Early-Career Skills Outlook 2026

*Employer Perspectives on Early-Career Skills and Talent Development*

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We seek partnerships to support the  
continuation of this report and expand its value  
for colleges and employers.

Please join us in our project for 2027!

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# Foreword

Dear Colleagues and Partners,

Following the release of the 2026 College Hiring Outlook, we are pleased to share the 2026 Early-Career Skills Outlook, a companion report focused on how employers evaluate early-career talent.

While the College Hiring Outlook examines hiring patterns and employer expectations at a market level, this report provides a closer look at how employers assess candidates within that environment—specifically, how skills and competencies are interpreted in early-career hiring.

As organizations continue to navigate evolving workforce demands, understanding how employers define readiness has become increasingly important for students, educators, and employers alike. This report is designed to provide clarity on those expectations and to support more informed decision-making across the talent pipeline.

The findings point to a consistent theme: early-career success depends not only on what candidates know, but on how effectively they apply and continue to develop their skills over time. This perspective reinforces the importance of experiential learning, foundational workplace competencies, and ongoing development after hiring.

We are grateful to the employers who contributed their perspectives and to the partners who use these insights to inform advising, curriculum design, and talent development strategies. We look forward to continuing this work and further advancing the understanding of early-career success.

Sincerely,

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# Executive Summary

Early-career readiness is defined less by what candidates know and more by how effectively they apply their skills in real work environments. Employers place the greatest emphasis on core workplace competencies—particularly reliability and professionalism—followed by interpersonal and cognitive skills such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking.

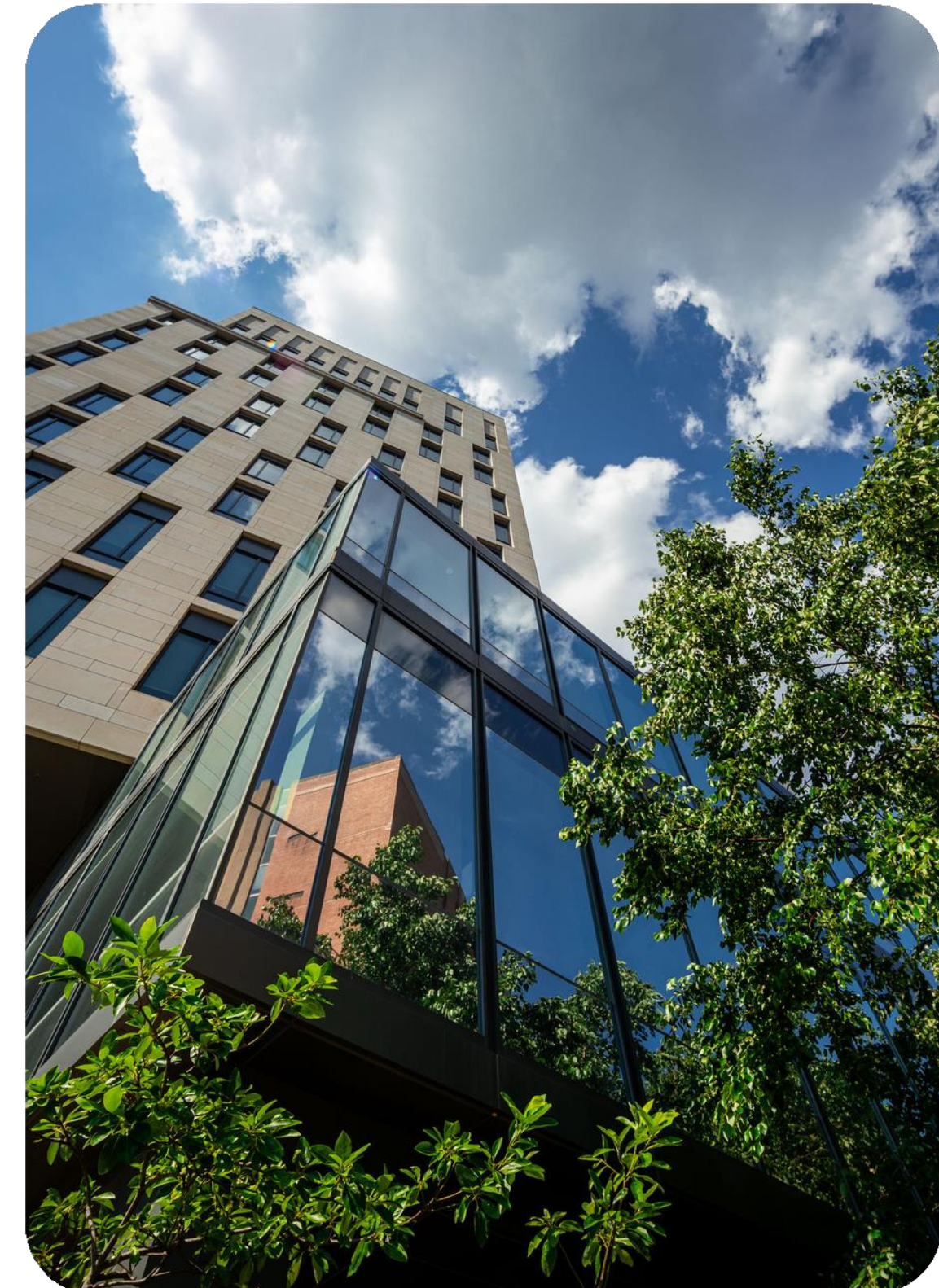
A clear gap exists between these foundational competencies and technical capabilities. Technical and AI-related skills are rated substantially lower and are rarely used as primary screening criteria at entry. Instead, employers expect many technical skills to be developed after hiring through training and on-the-job experience.

Skill priorities are highly consistent across organization sizes, indicating a shared baseline for evaluating early-career talent. However, technical expectations diverge more meaningfully, with larger organizations placing greater emphasis on specialized and advanced capabilities than small and mid-size employers.

Most employers report offering upskilling and reskilling opportunities, though the structure and depth of these programs vary. Internal training, mentoring, and applied learning are the most common approaches, reinforcing that skill development continues beyond entry-level hiring.

Across findings, one theme is consistent: early-career success depends on demonstrated performance, adaptability, and continuous development. Internships and co-op experiences remain the primary environments where employers assess how candidates apply skills in practice.

*Note: “Skills” is used broadly to include technical, interpersonal, and cognitive skills as well as core workplace competencies.*



# Key Findings

**1. Early-career readiness is defined by how candidates perform, not just what they know**

Core workplace competencies—such as reliability, professionalism, and ethical judgement—are the most valued competencies.

**2. Interpersonal and cognitive skills are essential for effective performance**

Communication, critical thinking, and teamwork consistently rank among the most important capabilities.

**3. Technical skills play a secondary role at entry**

While valued, technical and AI-related skills are typically developed after hiring rather than used as primary selection criteria.

**4. Employer expectations are highly aligned across organization sizes**

Skill priorities remain consistent across small, mid-size, and large organizations.

**5. Upskilling is widely available, but access varies by organization size**

Most employers report offering development opportunities, though access and level of support vary.

**6. Internships and co-ops are the primary evaluation environment**

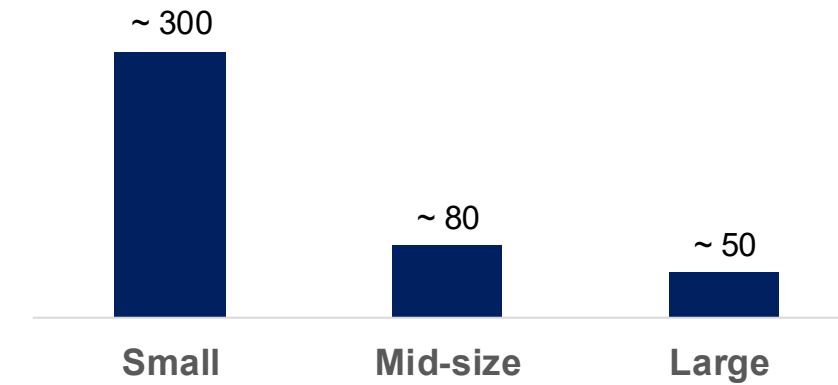
Employers rely on experiential learning settings to assess how candidates apply skills in practice.

# Methodology and Sample Profile

- This report is based on data from the 2026 College Hiring Outlook Survey, conducted between August and October 2025.
- A total of 647 employers participated, representing a range of industries and organizational sizes.
- The sample is primarily composed of small and mid-size organizations, with strong representation from employers in the Northeast region.
- Respondents include hiring managers, human resources professionals, and organizational leaders involved in early-career recruitment and workforce planning.
- All major NAICS industry sectors are represented, providing a cross-industry perspective on employer skill priorities.
- Response counts vary across sections due to differences in participation and completion rates.
- Findings should be interpreted as directional insights rather than precise estimates across all employers.

*Note: Organization size categories are based on employee count: Small (fewer than 500 employees), Mid-size (500–3,999 employees), Large (4,000 or more employees).*

**Skills Assessment Respondents by Organization Size**



**Overall Respondent Distribution by Industry Sector**

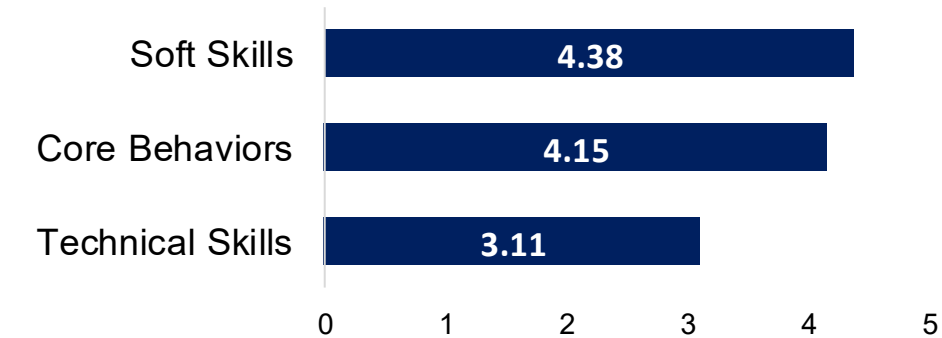


# Employer Priorities for Skills

- A clear hierarchy of skills emerges across categories**  
 Interpersonal and cognitive skills (mean = 4.38) and core workplace competencies (mean = 4.15) are rated significantly higher than technical skills (mean = 3.11), indicating that employers prioritize how candidates think, communicate, and operate over technical proficiency at entry.
- Top-rated competencies are concentrated in behavioral and interpersonal areas**  
 Reliability (4.87) and professionalism (4.80) are the highest-rated individual competencies, followed by critical thinking, teamwork, and communication—all above 4.5. This concentration reinforces that consistent performance and effective collaboration are baseline expectations.
- Technical skills are present but they are not the primary differentiator**  
 While still valued, technical competencies rank well below behavioral and interpersonal skills, suggesting they play a supporting role in early hiring decisions rather than serving as primary selection criteria.
- Employers evaluate readiness through application, not possession of skills**  
 The gap between categories indicates that employers place greater weight on how candidates apply skills in context—particularly in team-based and problem-solving environments—than on technical knowledge alone.

*Note: Competency importance is measured on a 1–5 scale (1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important)*

**Comparison of Workplace Competencies by Category**  
*(Mean Scores)*



**Top 10 Competencies Employers Value Most**  
*(Mean Scores)*



# Core Workplace Competencies

- **Core workplace competencies form the baseline for employability**  
High ratings across all items confirm that reliability, professionalism, and ethical judgment are not differentiators—they represent baseline expectations for early-career candidates.
- **Reliability and professionalism are rated highest, with accountability and time management also highly valued**  
Top-rated competencies emphasize reliability and professionalism, while accountability and time management also receive strong ratings, indicating that employers prioritize dependable performance.
- **Smaller organizations place slightly greater emphasis on ownership-related behaviors**  
While ratings are consistent overall, small employers report marginally higher emphasis on accountability and adaptability, likely reflecting leaner team structures and fewer support layers.

*Note: Competency importance is measured on a 1–5 scale (1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important). Results are based on approximately 500 responses per item, except for reliability and professionalism (n = 436).*

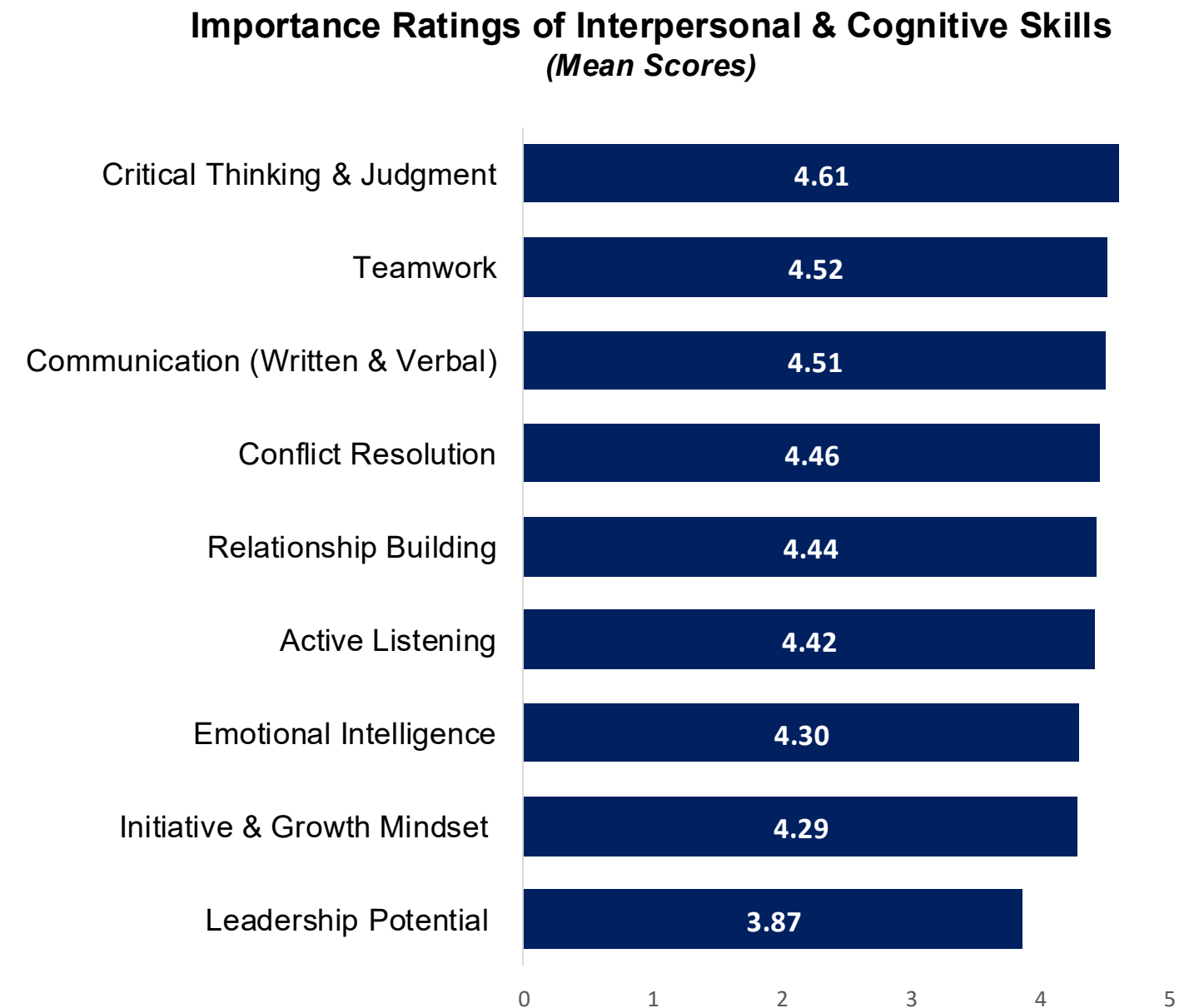
**Importance Ratings of Core Workplace Competencies**  
(Mean Scores)



# Interpersonal & Cognitive Skills (Soft Skills)

- **Cognitive and collaborative skills drive early-career effectiveness**  
Critical thinking, teamwork, and communication rank among the highest-rated competencies, highlighting their central role in day-to-day performance.
- **Relationship-oriented skills are closely aligned with top competencies**  
Skills such as conflict resolution, relationship building, and active listening follow closely behind, reinforcing the importance of navigating team and client interactions.
- **Leadership is not expected at entry**  
Lower ratings for leadership potential suggest employers prioritize contribution and collaboration over early demonstration of leadership capability.
- **Strong alignment across organization sizes reinforces shared expectations**  
Minimal variation indicates that these skills are universally required, regardless of organizational context.

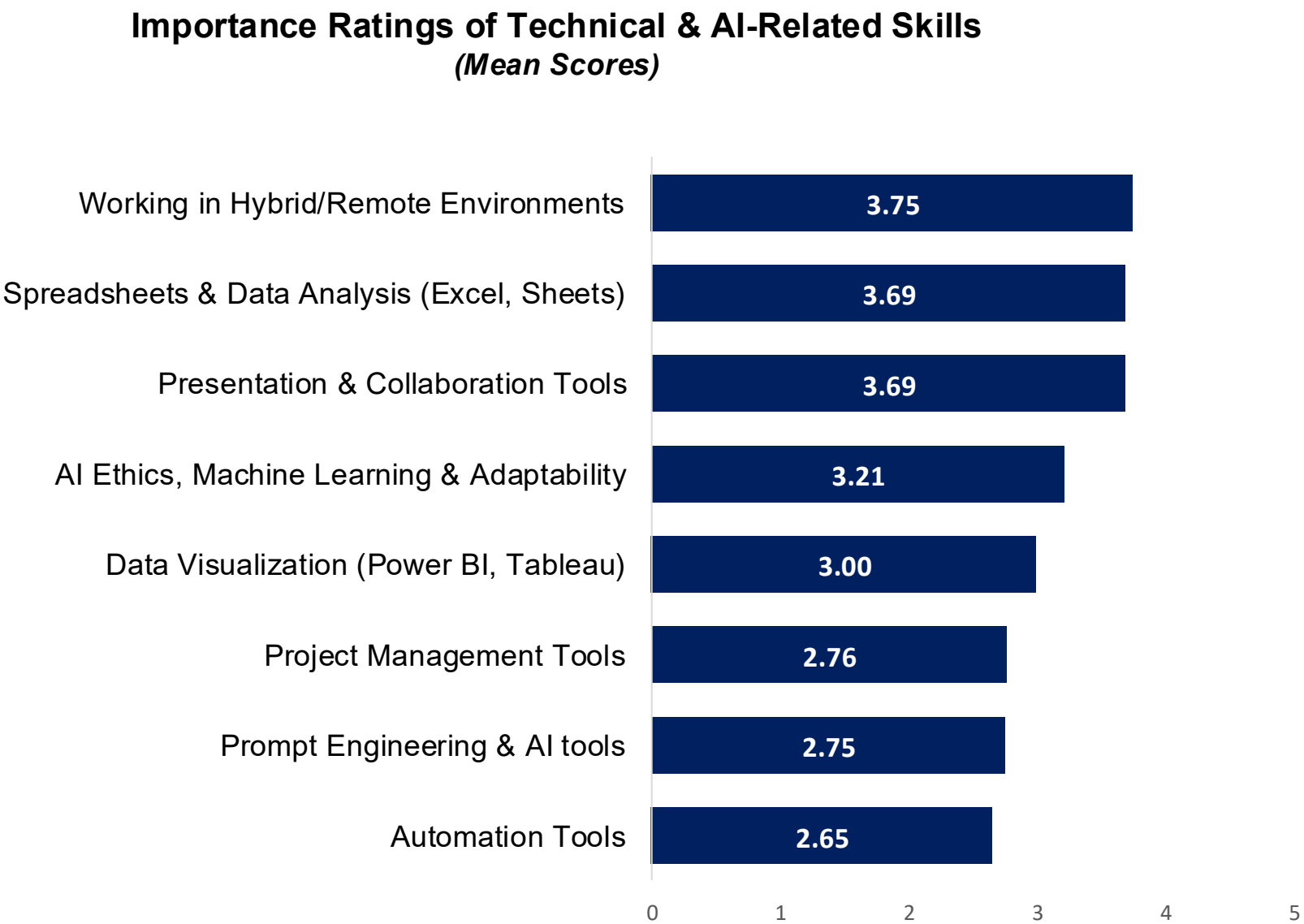
*Note:* Competency importance is measured on a 1–5 scale (1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important).  
Results are based on approximately 430 responses per item.



# Technical & AI-Related Skills

- Technical and AI-related skills are not the primary factor in early-career evaluation**  
Lower importance ratings indicate that these skills are considered alongside—rather than prioritized over—other competencies in initial hiring decisions.
- Higher ratings are concentrated in broadly applicable digital skills**  
Skills such as hybrid/remote work, data analysis, and collaboration tools are rated highest within the technical category, reflecting expectations for immediate contribution.
- Specialized and AI-related skills receive comparatively lower emphasis**  
Capabilities such as automation tools, prompt engineering, and advanced data visualization are rated lower, indicating they are viewed as useful but not required at entry.
- Technical expectations differ by organization size**  
Large organizations consistently assign higher importance to technical and AI-related skills, while small and mid-size employers report lower levels of emphasis.
- Differences are most pronounced in specialized technical areas**  
Variation across organization sizes is more visible for AI-related and advanced technical skills than for general digital skills.

*Note: Competency importance is measured on a 1–5 scale (1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important).  
Results are based on approximately 430 responses per item.*



## Employer Perspectives on Early-Career Skills (Qualitative Responses)

- **Employers report gaps in core workplace competencies and interpersonal skills**  
Responses point to challenges in communication, professionalism, reliability, accountability, and time management among early-career candidates.
- **Applied experience is a key signal of workplace readiness**  
Employers emphasize prior experience, with internships and co-ops frequently cited as settings where candidates demonstrate communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.
- **Technical skills are less frequently cited as the primary gap**  
While some employers note limited job-specific technical readiness, many indicate these skills are developed on the job rather than required at entry.
- **Skill expectations are influenced by organizational constraints**  
Responses suggest that hiring requirements, compensation structures, and workforce planning shape how employers evaluate and prioritize candidate skills.

### Employer Perspectives (Selected Responses)

*“Hiring managers focus on experience more than anything, so co-op experience makes candidates more competitive than other new graduates.”*

— Mid-size employer

*“Early-career candidates are often poor writers, and many applications are rejected for that reason. People skills—both with clients and across teams—are a growing challenge.”*

— Small employer

*“We primarily hire former co-op students. We know their skills, motivation, and how they fit within our firm.”*

— Small employer

*“The most important feature we look for is willingness to learn. Candidates need to show curiosity, adaptability, and the ability to learn quickly.”*

— Small employer

*“Looking for people who want to be pushed and grow in a career.”*

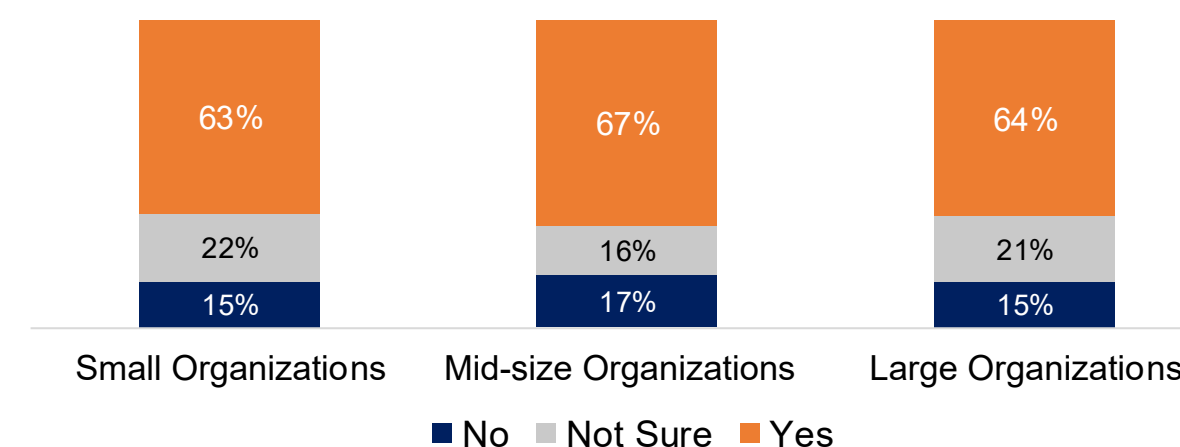
— Large employer

# Upskilling and Reskilling Opportunities

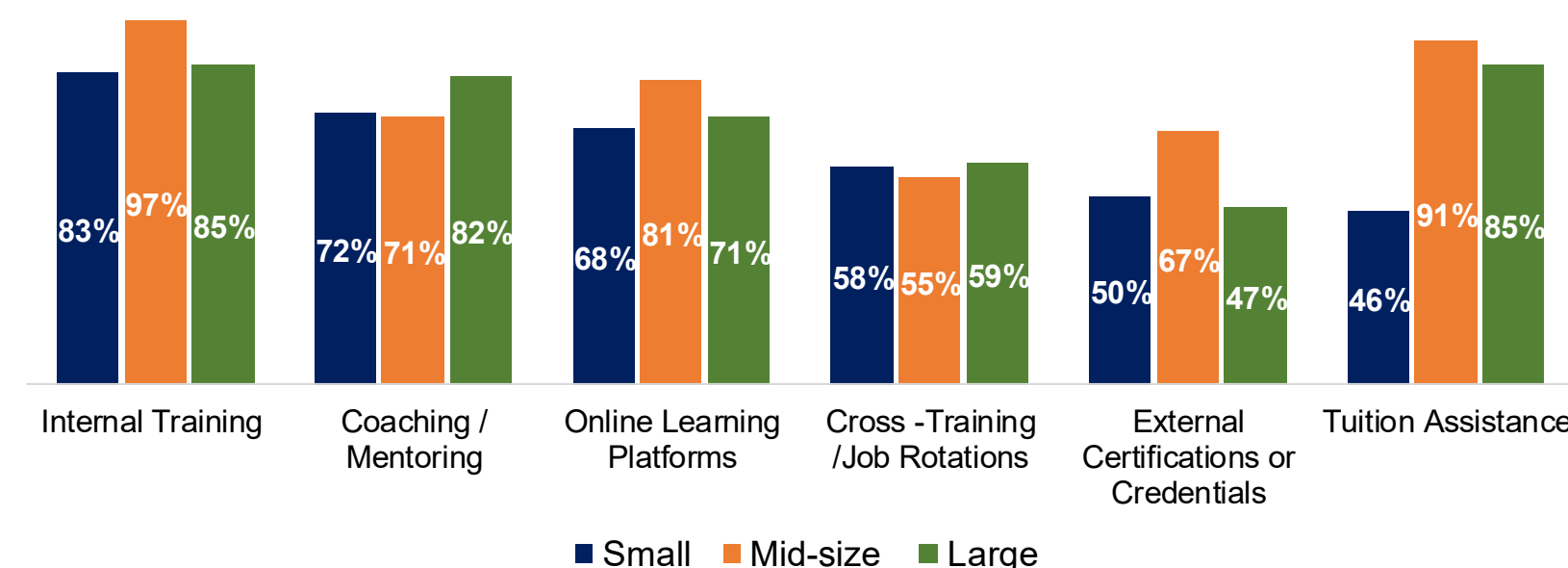
- Upskilling is widely available but varies in depth across organizations**  
 Approximately two-thirds of employers report offering development opportunities; however, access to more structured programs varies by organization size.
- Development is primarily delivered through internal and applied learning**  
 Internal training, mentoring, and online learning platforms are the most common approaches, indicating that skill development is embedded within day-to-day work.
- Structured development pathways are more common in larger organizations**  
 Mid-size and large employers report higher use of tuition assistance and external certifications, reflecting greater investment in formal development programs.

*Note: Percentages reflect employer responses to whether their organization provides upskilling or reskilling opportunities for early-career employees.*

Availability of Upskilling and Reskilling Opportunities (%)



How Employers Support Upskilling and Reskilling



# Conclusion

- **Early-career hiring prioritizes performance over preparation**  
Employers consistently emphasize how candidates operate—reliability, communication, and critical thinking—over what they know at entry.
- **Skill expectations are highly aligned across employers**  
Core priorities remain consistent across organization sizes, indicating a shared definition of early-career readiness.
- **Technical skills play a supporting—not leading—role at entry**  
Employers expect many technical capabilities to be developed after hiring, particularly in more specialized areas.
- **Early-career roles are designed for continued development**  
The widespread availability of upskilling reflects that employers do not expect full readiness at entry and instead build development into the role.
- **Experiential learning remains the strongest signal of readiness**  
Internships and co-op experiences are the primary environments where employers evaluate how candidates apply skills in practice.



# Implications and Next Steps for Stakeholders

The 2026 Early-Career Skills Outlook identifies actionable priorities for stakeholders across the talent ecosystem, reflecting evolving expectations in early-career hiring and development.



## For Colleges & Career Advisors

### 1. **Embed skill application across the student experience**

Integrate communication, teamwork, and problem-solving into coursework, projects, and assessments.

### 2. **Position internships and co-ops as core readiness signals**

Prioritize experiential learning as the primary way students demonstrate real-world capability.

### 3. **Align advising with employer evaluation criteria**

Shift messaging from “skills acquired” to “skills demonstrated” in academic and professional contexts.



## For Employers

### 1. **Prioritize behavioral readiness in hiring decisions**

Use structured assessments to evaluate how candidates operate in real or simulated work scenarios.

### 2. **Invest in structured early-career development pathways**

Leverage onboarding, mentoring, and applied learning to accelerate skill development after entry.

### 3. **Expand access to development opportunities**

Ensure consistent availability of training, mentoring, and advancement pathways across roles and teams



## For Students

### 1. **Build evidence of skills through experience**

Engage in internships, projects, and team-based work that demonstrate reliability, communication, and problem-solving.

### 2. **Approach technical skills as continuously developing**

Focus on learning agility and the ability to apply tools, rather than attempting to master all skills before entry.

### 3. **Evaluate employers based on development opportunities**

Consider access to training, mentorship, and growth pathways when making career decisions.

## How to Interpret This Report

- Findings provide directional insights into early-career skills outlook for 2026.
- Results are intended to inform advising, program planning, and employer engagement, not precise forecasts.
- When benchmarking, use this report alongside other national and regional datasets.

## Presenting This Report

- Organizations interested in hosting a presentation of this report (in-person or virtual) may contact Murugan Anandarajan ([ma33@drexel.edu](mailto:ma33@drexel.edu)).
- Media inquiries should be directed to Annie Korp, Drexel University News and Media Relations ([amk522@drexel.edu](mailto:amk522@drexel.edu)).
- Institutions and employers interested in participating in or supporting the 2027 College Hiring Outlook may contact Cuneyt Gozu ([cg624@drexel.edu](mailto:cg624@drexel.edu)).

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