Global Career Advantage

Career Readiness
Pulse 2026/27

The UK employer survey on early careers workplace readiness. What 130+ UK employers told us, and what it means for the year ahead.

Fieldwork: July – August 2026 · Published September 2026 · globalcareeradvantage.com

Executive Summary

The gap isn't closing. It's widening.

We asked 130+ UK employers who hire early careers talent, graduates, apprentices, interns and school leavers, how ready their new starters really are for work. The picture is consistent across sectors and company sizes: readiness is a live, growing problem, managers feel underprepared to close it, and most employers are still increasing investment rather than pulling back.

85%

rate career readiness a moderate to significant challenge

49%

say the readiness gap is wider than three years ago, versus just 8% narrower

63%

say it takes six months or more to reach full independence

Only 1 in 4

managers are rated confident leading early careers hires

What this report covers

This report sets out what employers told us about the scale of the readiness gap, where it shows up, what it's costing them in time, offers and people, and what they're doing to close it. The findings stand on their own: this is what employers are seeing right now, in their own words and numbers. At the end, there's an offer of a free, no-obligation session where we walk your team through how your own sector compares.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"Bridging the gap between the highly structured environment of education and the realities of the workplace. Work isn't always structured or predictable, priorities change, there is ambiguity and things move quickly."*

Methodology

Who took part

The Career Readiness Pulse is an anonymous survey of UK employers who hire early careers talent. Fieldwork ran for 6 weeks from the start of July and closed with 130+ responses. Respondents were reached primarily through the Early Careers Development Network and Global Career Advantage's employer contacts. Responses are self-selected rather than drawn from a weighted, nationally representative panel, so figures should be read as a snapshot of what these employers are seeing, not a scientific population estimate. Where a question allowed more than one answer, this is noted alongside the figures.

Sector

Sector	n	%
Financial, professional & legal services	39	30%
Construction and infrastructure	18	14%
Manufacturing and engineering	13	10%
Other	13	10%
Technology	11	8%
Retail and hospitality	9	7%
Telecoms, energy and utilities	8	6%
Public sector	8	6%
Creative, media and marketing	4	3%
Other sectors (<3% each)	8	6%

Organisation size

Employees	%
10,000+	31%
1,000 to 4,999	36%
5,000 to 9,999	19%
250 to 999	11%
Under 250	3%

Respondent role

Role	%
Early Careers / Emerging Talent	76%
Learning and Development	9%
Talent Acquisition	8%
HR / Other	6%

Respondents hire across the full early careers spectrum: 89% hire graduates, 85% apprentices, 65% interns, 56% work experience, 49% industrial placements and 40% school leavers. Most run cohorts of 11 to 500 early careers hires a year.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"The gap between education and employment, and support with the generational difference between some line managers and early careers hires."*

Section 1

The scale of the challenge

Career readiness isn't a fringe concern. It's rated a moderate to significant challenge by the large majority of employers we surveyed, and most say it's getting worse, not better.

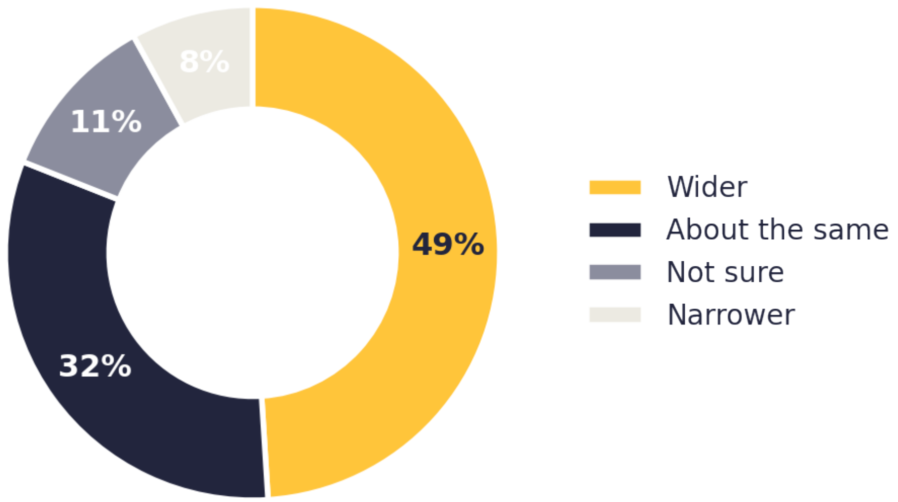
85%

of employers rate career readiness a moderate to significant challenge for their organisation right now.

49%

of employers say the readiness gap is wider than three years ago, compared with just 8% who say it's narrower. If this were a pandemic-era disruption working its way out of the system, the trend would be narrowing. It isn't.

Compared with three years ago, the readiness gap is:



Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"More realistic expectations of progression in the workplace. The steep learning curve is significantly underestimated, with many graduates simply focussing on how to get to first promotion."*

Section 2

Where the gaps are

We asked employers to name up to three areas where new hires fall shortest. The pattern is clear: the biggest gaps are behavioural and social, not technical or academic.

Only 9% named problem solving and 5% named digital or everyday tools. The gap has moved from what new hires know to how they show up.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"Professionalism and communication for Emerging Talent, but also more understanding from line managers that these are new to work and won't be perfect from day one, so we need their support to improve it."*

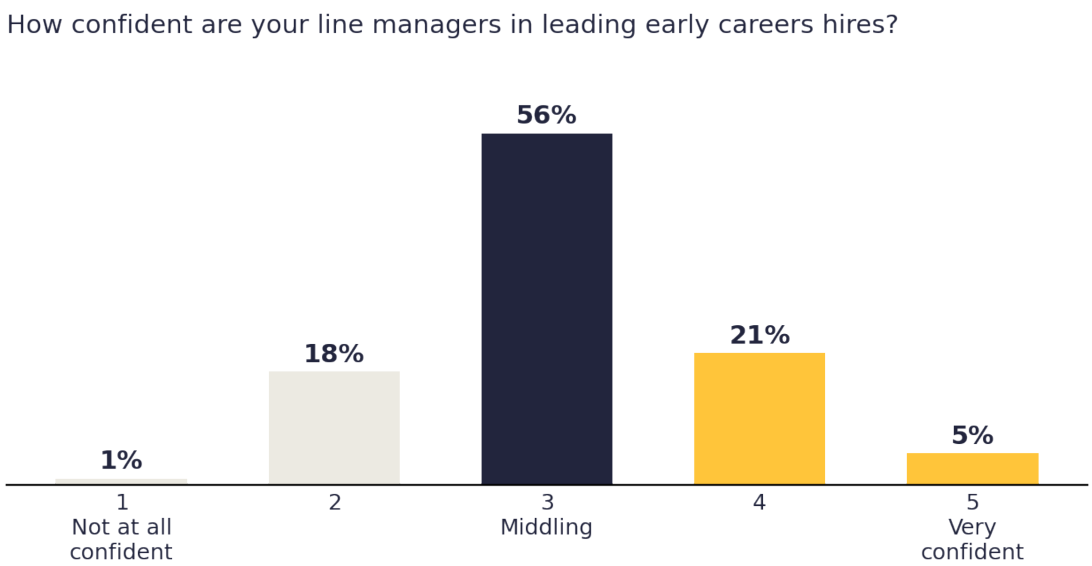
Section 3

Managers are under pressure too

Closing a readiness gap this size depends on line managers. Right now, most employers don't think their managers are equipped for it.

1 in 4

Only 1 in 4 managers are rated confident at leading and developing early careers hires.
Most sit in the middle: capable, but not confident.



This matters because manager capability is now the second most wanted area of investment among these employers (named by 60%, see Section 6), just behind skills development itself. Employers aren't just asking new hires to close the gap. They're recognising managers need support to meet them halfway.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"Supporting line managers in understanding and leading a multi-generational workforce, who naturally have varying needs."*

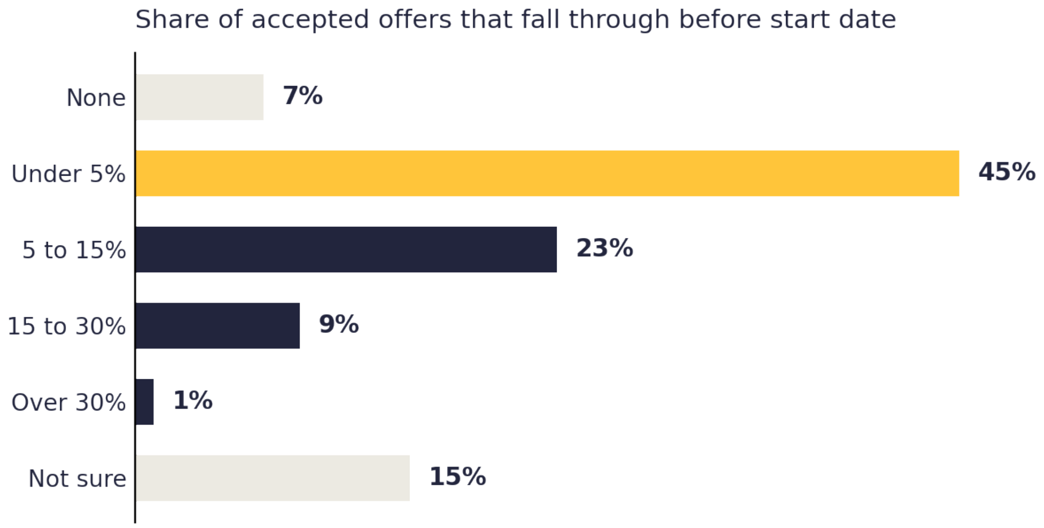
Section 4

What it's costing employers

Readiness gaps don't stay contained to the first few weeks. They show up in offers that fall through, and in people who leave early.

33%

of employers see 5% or more of accepted offers fall through before day one, a real cost, but not the norm: 52% keep it under 5%, including 7% with none at all. For the third where it is a problem, it isn't easing: 74% say their renege rate is stable or rising, not falling.



Company size matters too: 45% of employers with 10,000+ staff see 5% or more of offers fall through, nearly double the 23-24% rate among firms with 1,000 to 9,999 staff.

79%

of employers say career readiness gaps are contributing to early attrition, at least to some degree. For 31%, it's a moderate amount or more.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"Finding graduates and apprentices who are genuinely work-ready and have the right skills and potential, not just a strong CV or interview."*

Section 5

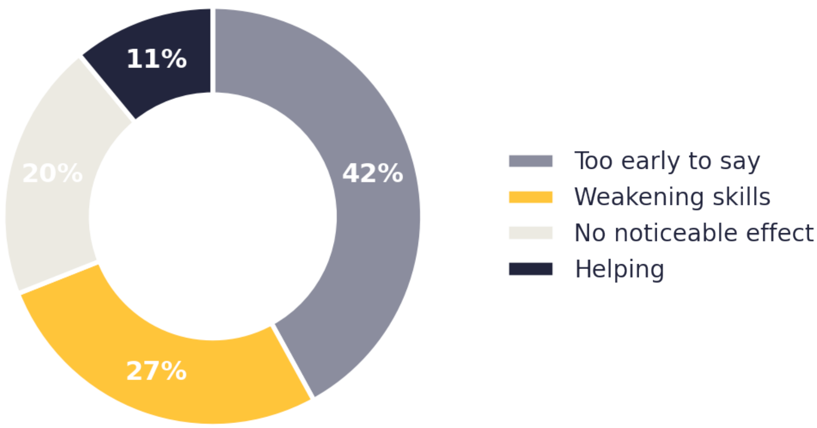
AI and the changing skills picture

We asked employers whether growing use of AI is affecting the foundational skills new hires arrive with. Opinion is split, but where employers do have a view, it leans negative.

27%

of employers say AI is already weakening new hires' foundational skills, compared with just 11% who say it's helping. 42% say it's too early to tell, and 20% see no noticeable effect.

Is growing use of AI affecting new hires' foundational skills?



Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"No matter how much we educate, candidates still rely on AI to give them the correct answer rather than presenting who they are, their passions and motivations."*

Section 6

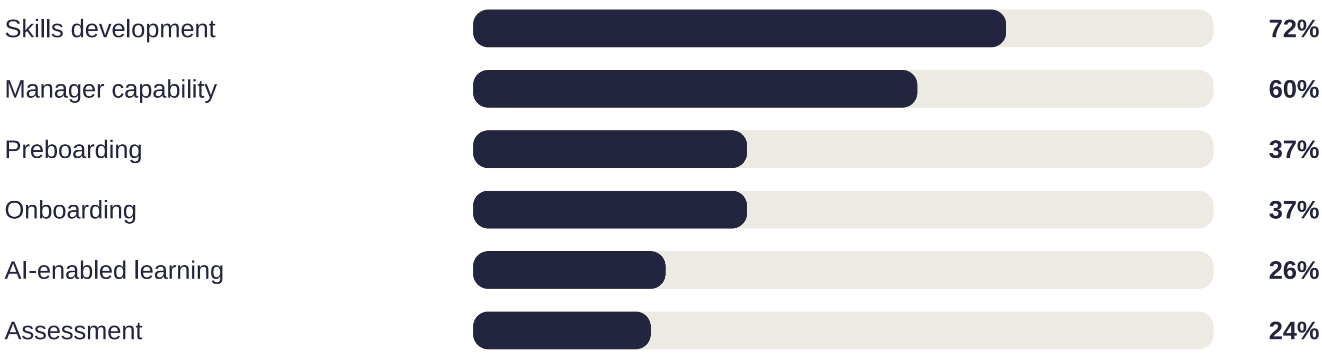
What employers are doing about it

Despite the pressure, most employers are leaning in rather than pulling back. Investment plans and current practice tell a consistent story.

49%

of employers plan to increase investment in career readiness over the next 12 months, compared with just 10% planning to cut it. 35% plan to hold steady.

Where employers most want to invest (employers could select multiple areas)



Most employers already have foundations in place, but the more resource-intensive interventions are far less common. 95% run an internal induction and 65% provide manager training, but only 37% use a dedicated preboarding platform to keep new hires engaged before day one, and just 34% run external training.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"A structured, cross functional, globally standard pre-boarding and onboarding program."*

In Their Own Words

What employers told us

We asked employers, in one line, what the single biggest career readiness challenge is that they'd most like solved. A selection of responses:

"Young people not knowing how to work in an office."

"Building resilience in the workplace."

"Manager having more confidence in the quality of the hires."

"The assessment. With AI, it's harder to assess technical skills."

"Understanding of workplace expectations."

"Taking initiative in their development."

"Workplace and office etiquette."

"Closing the gap between strong academic performance and genuine workplace readiness: confidence, commercial judgement, communication and critical thinking."

"Confidence and social skills."

"More ambition than ability."

"Adaptability and personal responsibility."

"Ability to navigate ambiguity with confidence."

"Learning agility and appetite."

"Commercial awareness in a consultancy environment."

Using This Report

Putting these findings to work

This report is most useful as a starting point, not a shelf item. A few ways employers we work with put findings like these to use:

01

Benchmark your own numbers

Compare your renege rate, ramp-up time and manager confidence against the employer benchmark in this report to see where you're ahead or behind.

02

Make the case for investment

Use Section 6 to show your leadership team that increasing investment in career readiness is what most employers are already doing, not a risky bet.

03

Focus on managers, not just new hires

Manager capability is the second most wanted investment area among employers surveyed. If budget is limited, this supports prioritising manager training alongside new hire programmes.

04

Ask your own people the same question

We asked employers, in one line, what their biggest readiness challenge is. Ask your own managers the same question and see how their answers compare.

05

Revisit it next year

The readiness gap described here is widening, not narrowing. Tracking your own numbers year on year will show whether you're closing the gap or falling further behind.

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"Year on year improvement of initial training before they join the desk, and then continuous improvement of L&D frameworks once they join: manager training, rotation objectives, and regular check-ins to catch performance gaps early."*

About Global Career Advantage

Where we might help

We work with employers on both sides of this gap: getting new hires workplace-ready before day one, and helping managers lead a workforce that thinks and communicates differently to the one they trained on. Everything is tailored to your sector, your people and the situations they'll actually face.

For New Hires

- Workplace Ready Hub, preboarding platform
- New Employee's Guide to Success, live training
- Human Skills Training
- Reinforcement Workshops
- Collaboration Workshop

For Managers

- The Modern Manager Hub
- Reinforcement Workshops
- Collaboration Workshop
- The Manager's Toolkit

Book a Career Readiness Sector Review (free, around 30 minutes)

We'll brief your team on how your sector's results compare to this employer benchmark: your biggest readiness gaps, your renege and ramp-up figures, and what other employers in your sector are doing about it.

globalcareeradvantage.com/career-readiness-pulse

Get in touch: luke@globalcareeradvantage.com · globalcareeradvantage.com

Employer Quote, On Their Biggest Early Careers Readiness Challenge:

> *"Our early careers recruits are typically emotionally and technically ready. We just have to coach their growth and development at the right pace."*