

# The Career Imperative:

Why employee growth is the smart bet for business resilience



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# Dear fellow executives and people leaders,

In our busy organizations, it's easy to overlook just how much guidance and encouragement today's employees are seeking. Career support is too often treated as an event, not a journey, which leaves many talented individuals to chart their own course without a partner along the way.

This year, our State of Careers research is challenging you to look closer. Employees want support that's there in moments big and small.

AI disruption, the shift toward skills-based models and new ways of working are fundamentally reshaping organizational expectations and the meaning of success. The future of work isn't something off on the horizon. It's developing right now. The success of your business is inseparable from the strength and performance of your workforce.

Employees need space to test out new roles and skills to shape their own future, and you need aligned and engaged teams that contribute to the longevity and resilience of your business. Now is the time to build a more dedicated workforce and make career conversations and opportunities a living, breathing part of your culture.

In this second report, you'll find the reasons behind these changing expectations and a roadmap on how to build a future where success is destined.

I'm hopeful and energized by what's possible. Let's move beyond tradition to build a high-performing workforce and create an environment where every person's ambition is matched by real support and where your entire organization thrives.

All the best,

**Caroline Pfeiffer Marinho**

Global Business Leader, Talent Solutions Right Management





# Introduction

**Today's workers are hungry for growth and development. They want to build new skills, deepen their expertise and find meaning in their work.**

Yet, despite this ambition, many lack the clear support and guidance needed to turn these goals into reality. Without a reliable roadmap or trusted partners to help navigate their career journeys, employees are relying on self-direction and chance opportunities rather than intentional development.

Part 2 of the State of Careers focuses on this growing disconnect. While many employees are charting their own paths, leaders are navigating rapid change and relying on methods that, despite their best intentions, fall short of providing the ongoing, forward-looking guidance that today's talent needs.

Adapting to the future of career development means rethinking how your organization supports your people. It's time to close the gap between employee expectations and leader intentions. This report will give you the data and insights to seize this opportunity and lead the change.

# Career planning is broken — and most employees know it

In last year's State of Careers series, we asked North American employees what their career goals were and found a wide variety of individual-focused goals, the majority not aligned to traditional career ladders. As a result, only 27% of employees mentioned having career plans.

As we moved to a global sample this year, we dove deeper to better understand what supports employees in creating career plans and what those plans look like. We largely found that the majority of existing plans resemble a wide variety of goals rather than a clear path to achieve them.



**4 in 10**

workers don't have  
a career plan



**16%**

of employees  
see growth as a  
traditional ladder



**12%**

aim for management  
roles



#### How Employees Describe their Current Career Plan



**Only 4%**  
**of**  
**employees**  
have a formal or  
set career plan.

When asked directly about their career plans, 4 in 10 workers admit they don't have a plan at all. Of those who do, many describe a desired role or general aspiration rather than a concrete or actionable path. Notably, only 4% point to a clearly documented or structured career plan. This data shows that employees aren't receiving the support they need to achieve their goals.

Understanding what career success means for employees is key to bridging this gap. The classic career ladder is no longer the main route to success. Employees are seeking a different kind of growth. Last year, just 16% saw career advancement as climbing a traditional ladder. This year, only 12% are aiming for formal management roles. Most employees now look for impact, skills development, flexibility and meaningful work that fits their values.

As organizations flatten and middle layers shrink, the familiar rungs of the career ladder are disappearing. Employees are increasingly looking to lateral moves, skill-based pivots and project opportunities rather than waiting for promotions.

**When the new career house is only one story tall,  
success comes from finding new paths to flourish,  
not necessarily climbing upward.**

# Career DIY: when employees are left to build alone

Employees Describe How they Defined their Current Career Plan



Left to their own devices, today's talent is largely self-directed. Employees are shaping their own career paths by following their interests (32%), learning new skills independently (29%), taking risks (27%) and figuring things out through trial and error (19%). This drive reflects a strong desire to grow and adapt in a workplace transformed by AI and ongoing change. Yet only 1 in 5 say their manager actively supports them in mapping a career path, and just 15% see clear guidance from their organization.

Without proactive leadership and alignment, this do-it-yourself approach creates a gap between employee development and organizational needs. AI is rapidly redefining roles and, as a result, business priorities are evolving. This employee-organization misalignment undermines workforce effectiveness, widens skill gaps and hampers the organization's ability to stay competitive. Companies looking to experience higher productivity and readiness for change must intentionally connect talent growth and focused development with their strategic goals.

Leaders Describe their Organization's Approach to Supporting Employees Defining their Career Plans



# Current leadership support isn't hitting the mark—here's what does

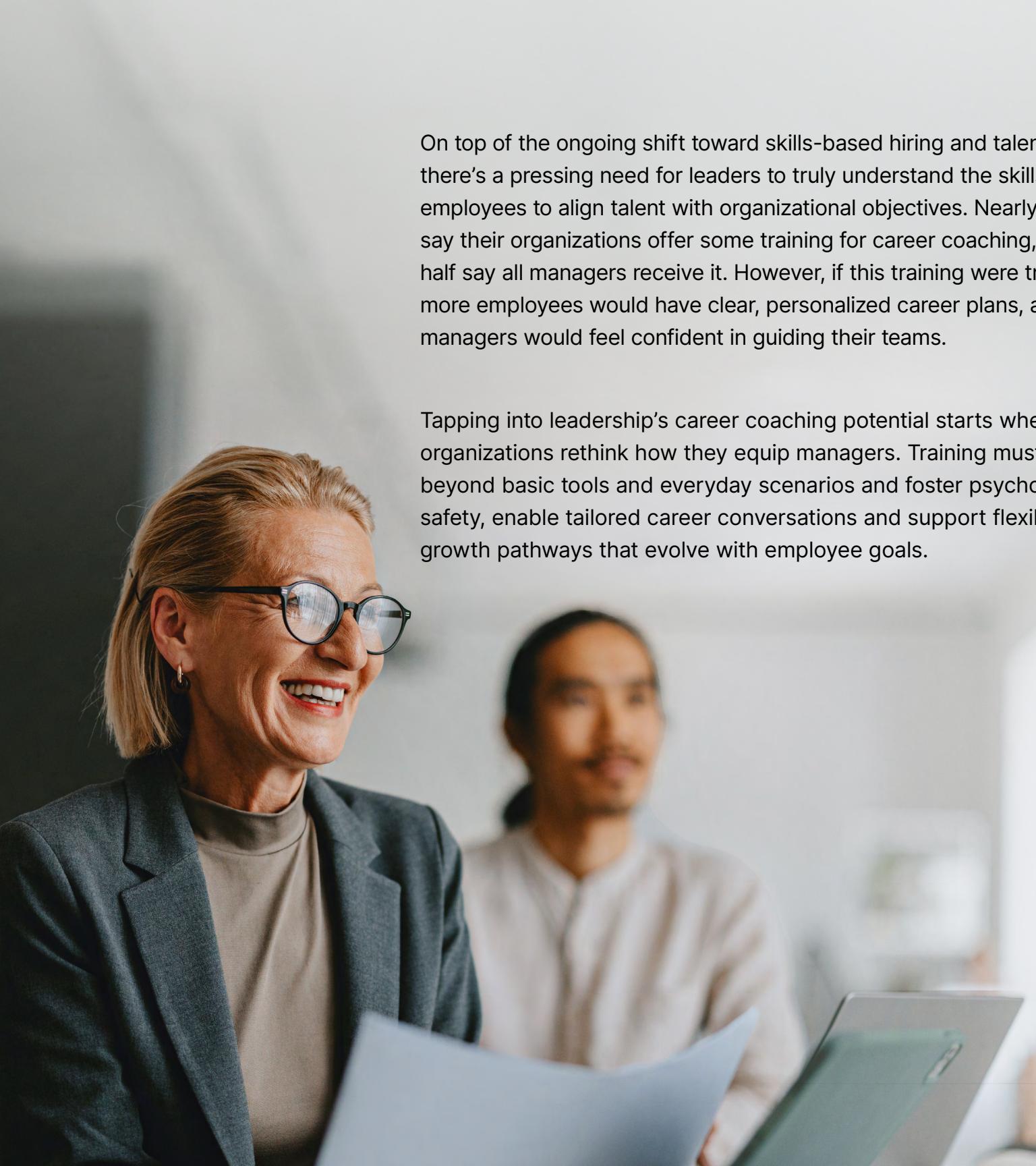
Leadership today faces unprecedented demands, caught between shrinking HR resources and the urgent need to keep teams productive amid talent scarcity. Last year, 69% of leaders believed their employees had clear career plans. However, reality doesn't fully support that confidence. This year, when asked how they support career growth, most leaders mentioned formal processes like performance reviews (15%) and individual development plans (14%) — activities often treated as annual checkboxes rather than meaningful conversations.

This discrepancy happens for understandable reasons. Simply put, most managers — three out of four — are overwhelmed.<sup>1</sup> More than half of leaders are facing the risk of not having the talent their teams need, while 68% are trying to meet organizational demands while sourcing the critical skills required for future growth and innovation.<sup>2</sup>

The faster things move, the harder it becomes for people and organizations to pause, reflect and plan. Managers often feel under-equipped to have meaningful career conversations as a result. Fewer HR roles and increasing operational pressures mean managers are juggling day-to-day productivity with career support duties that require dedicated time. Many leaders want to help but lack the workload capacity and training to make career development an ongoing priority.

1. Gartner: Top 5 HR Trends and Priorities That Matter Most in 2025

2. Workday: Talent Shortage Concerns Drive Shift to Skills-Based Strategies

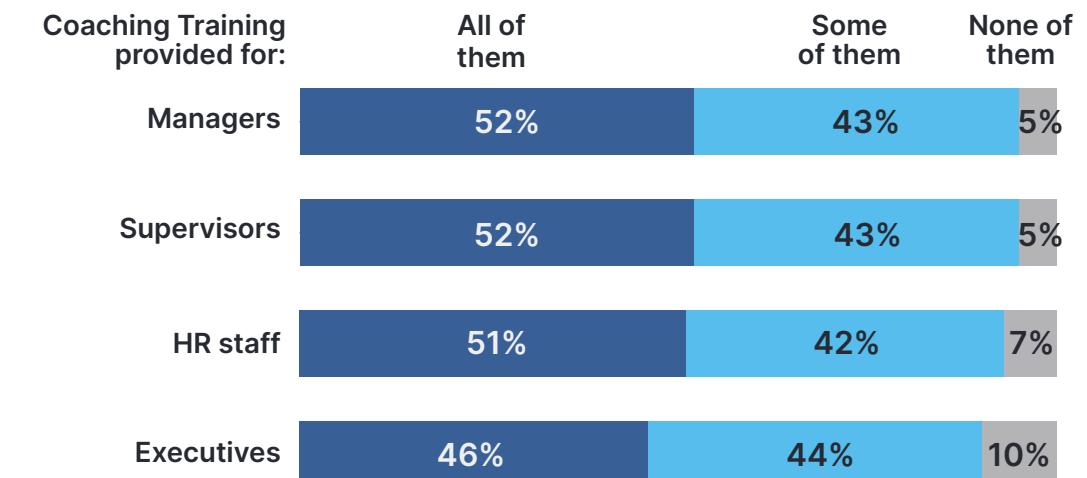


On top of the ongoing shift toward skills-based hiring and talent pooling, there's a pressing need for leaders to truly understand the skills of their employees to align talent with organizational objectives. Nearly all leaders say their organizations offer some training for career coaching, and about half say all managers receive it. However, if this training were truly effective, more employees would have clear, personalized career plans, and more managers would feel confident in guiding their teams.

Tapping into leadership's career coaching potential starts when organizations rethink how they equip managers. Training must go beyond basic tools and everyday scenarios and foster psychological safety, enable tailored career conversations and support flexible growth pathways that evolve with employee goals.

This approach transforms career development from a compliance exercise into a driver of engagement and retention. In a world where skills-based strategies are becoming the norm, organizations that fail to link development to real skills risk overlooking, and even losing, employees with the capabilities most critical for future success. Career navigation goes further than basic planning and coaching. It builds adaptability and empowers employees to make smart moves as work keeps changing.

#### Proportion of Training/Support Provided in Organizations to Coach Others in Their Careers (As Reported by Leaders)



# Feedback isn't fueling careers

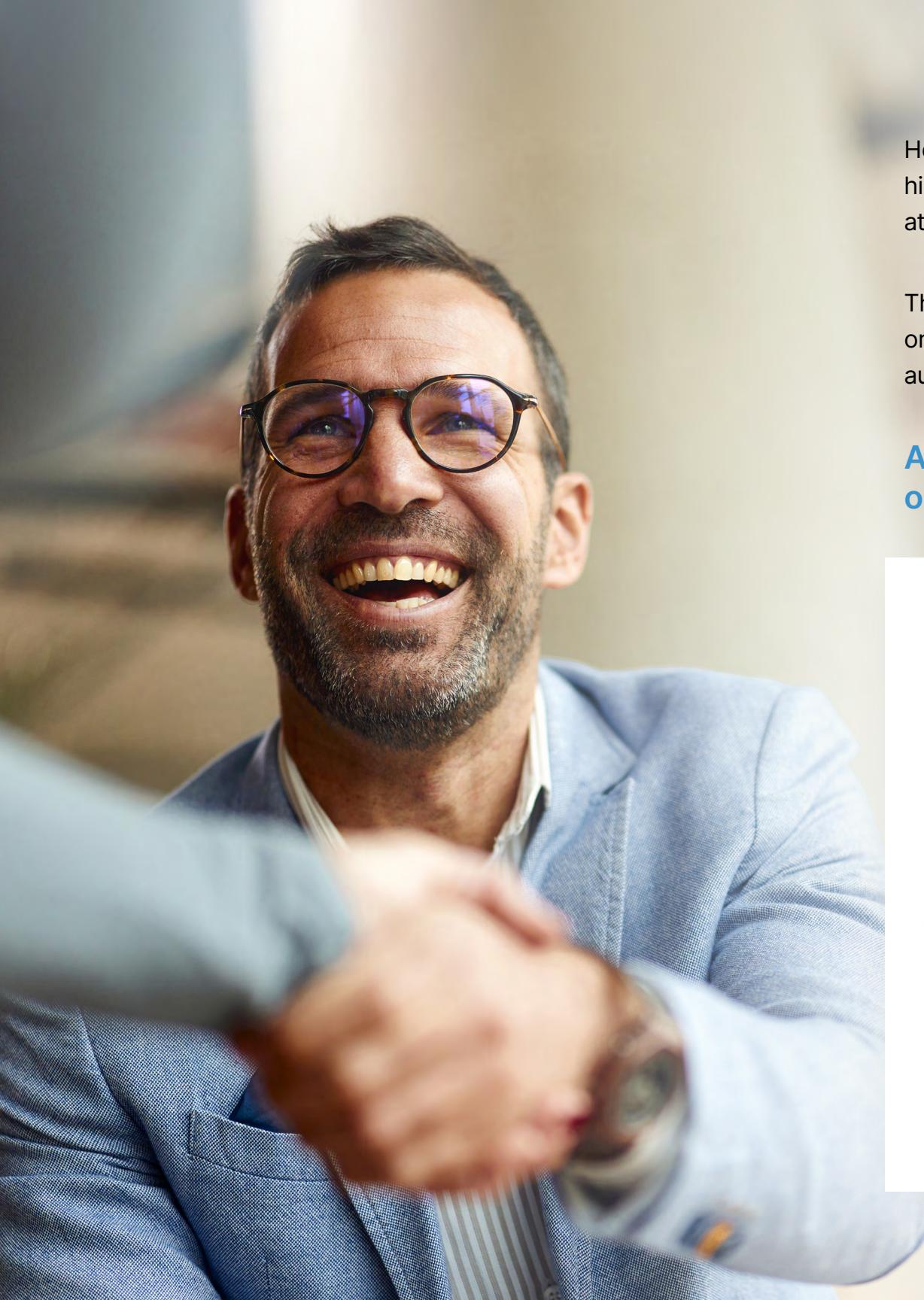
We examined what employees are currently getting from their employers, the types of support they find most helpful and where organizations say they are spending their development budgets.

**What we found is that employees want experiential growth — to practice new skills hands on and ask questions tied to the obstacles they see every day.**

The top two ways employees say their employer can help them succeed in the next two years are opportunities for internal mobility (20%) and formal development programs (19%). Internal face-to-face development programs (15%) and regular performance assessments (15%) were the other most popular choices.

## Employee Preferences for Skill Building Support from their Employer to Succeed in their Career in the Next 2 Years





However, the most budgeted item for organizations (74%) was performance measurement and feedback. Many highly valued programs — such as mentoring, coaching and expanded mobility — are frequently underfunded or at risk of being cut.

This mismatch between employees' vision of support and what employers are financially prioritizing is threatening organizations' ability to prepare for tomorrow's challenges. AI is a moving target that's splintering jobs into automated and augmented parts.

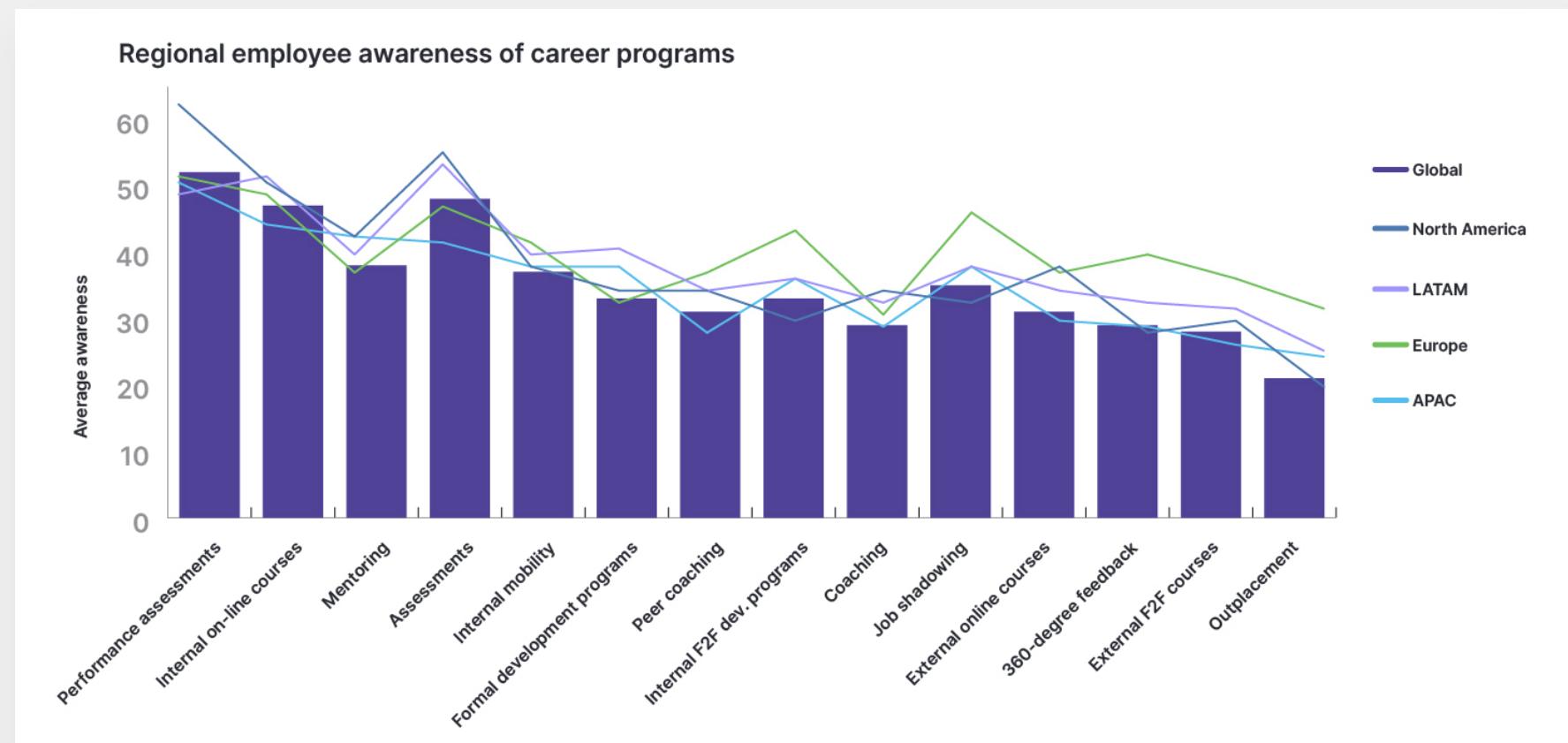
**As companies speed up their shift to skills-based strategies, relying only on performance reviews is becoming outdated and shortsighted.**

#### Current Budget for Career Support Activities (As Reported by Leaders)



# Regional differences in how leaders support employees

Organizations are making real efforts to offer support through a range of programs, yet challenges remain in awareness and utilization.



Our research shows that employees' awareness of career programs is generally low, with a global average of just 35%. Awareness also varies by region. Latin American employees have the highest familiarity with experiential and flexible learning opportunities provided by their organizations, including job shadowing, external online courses, face-to-face internal development programs and 360-degree feedback opportunities.

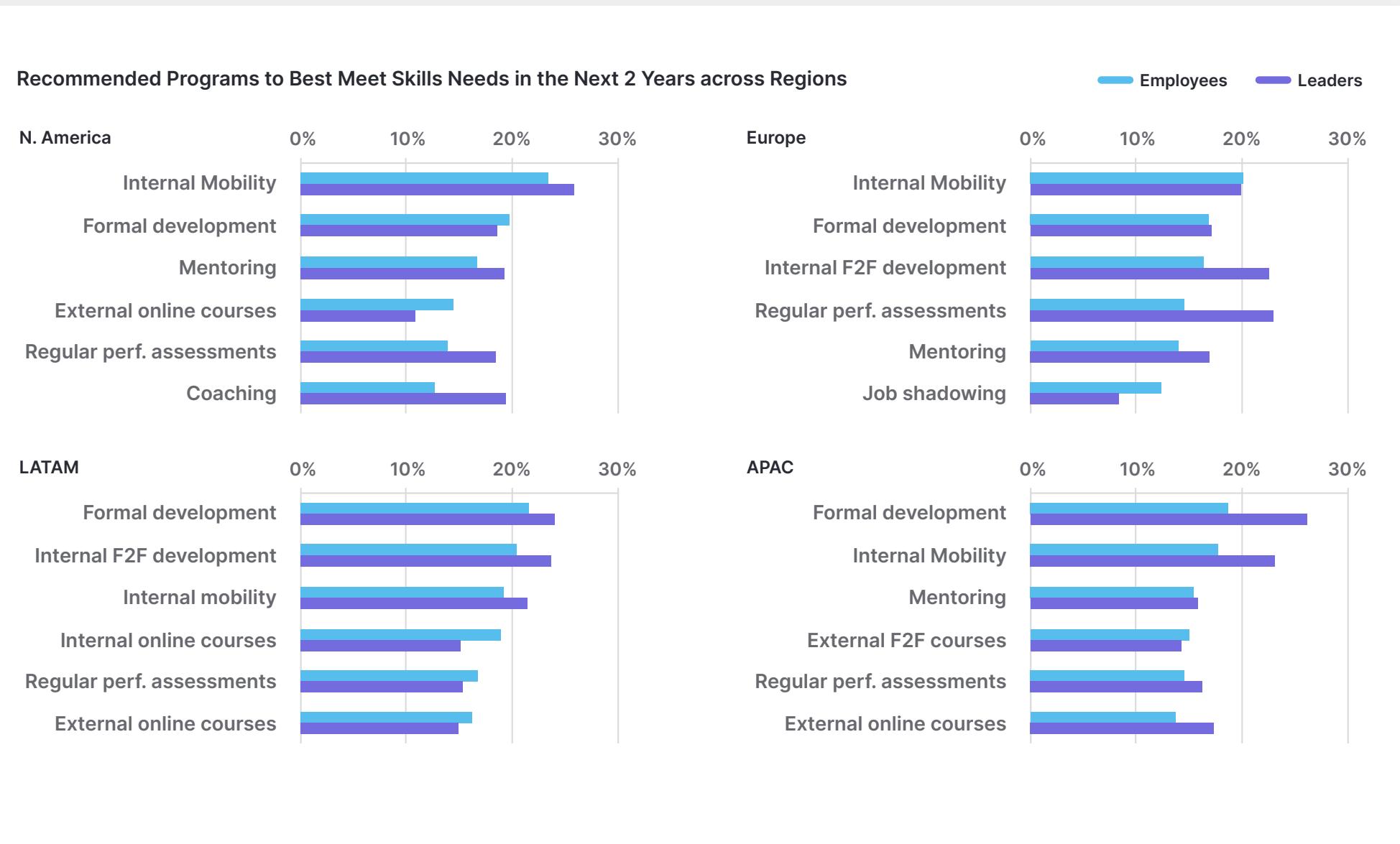
North America tends to be most aware of static feedback-focused approaches, including performance assessments and other assessments. Employees in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region report lower overall awareness of skill building support, although Europe is somewhat more aware of assessments and job shadowing than APAC.

While employers need to evolve the types of career advancement opportunities they offer, it's just as important to ensure employees are not only aware of these programs but also understand their benefits and are motivated and enabled to use them.

Globally, data shows employees prefer more flexible and experiential learning opportunities over traditional, static skill-based training.

While they are comfortable with regular performance reviews and internal online courses, employees express a strong desire for sponsored external courses, mentoring, face-to-face programs, formal development initiatives and, especially, internal mobility options.

However, although many employees are encouraged to “upskill,” they often lack access to high-quality, relevant development. Training is abundant but can be overwhelming, with a poor signal-to-noise ratio. What’s truly needed is clear, targeted “just-in-time” learning that closely aligns with immediate challenges and future skill demands.



# A new model for career enablement

With modern technologies like AI rewriting work as we know it, we need to radically redefine how we think about roles and careers away from career paths and formal training approaches. The World Economic Forum reports that within the next five years, 39% of the skills employees use today will change or become outdated.<sup>3</sup>

The key point is that today's skills are at risk. To prepare for this shift, employees need support in knowing which skills to focus on and how to build them. This support comes through dynamic career navigation that allows them to actively explore, adapt and grow amid change. The best way to do this is by providing flexible, experience-based support tailored to employees' evolving priorities and goals that are aligned with organizational needs. Now is the time to reset how your organization shows up for its employees by embracing this navigation mindset and empowering them to stay ready for the future.



3. World Economic Forum: The Future of Jobs Report 2025

4. LinkedIn Learning: Workplace Learning Report 2025



As experts in outplacement, Right Management sees daily that organizations are struggling to support their current employees on career goal definition and planning. Employees come to us, not only concerned because they've been unexpectedly let go, but also in crisis because they don't know what to pursue next. We've built our expertise and success around coaching employees to define what next step will be most fulfilling and co-creating a plan for personal branding that highlights their unique skills and expertise in the role and embracing the unknown.

The unfortunate part is that most of our candidates experience this level of career support for the first time on their way out of an organization, rather than while working with their current employer. Had they received this same targeted, individualized support earlier, they may have found a role that nurtured their skills and allowed them to effectively contribute to the company's growth. In fact, after working with us, many of our clients rehire the same former employees they helped through outplacement.

Career support shouldn't only be for people leaving the company. It should be a key part of creating a talent framework that evolves with employees and

the ongoing shifts driven by AI advancements, changing skill requirements and workforce transformation. Organizationally aligned coaching gives employees direction regarding possible career pathways while equipping organizations with the motivated teams and skills they need to adapt and compete.

**We propose redefining how organizations support employee careers altogether so employees feel valued, leaders have the skilled teams they need, plans are agile and your organization is equipped with strong employees who will lead it into the next era of growth and technology.**

Redefining career development into this ongoing, flexible ecosystem creates a high-retention environment that helps shelter you from the skills gaps plaguing 63% of employers.<sup>3</sup> It increases your ability to lead in AI adoption by 42% and boosts assurance in retaining qualified talent by 34%.<sup>4</sup>

3. World Economic Forum: The Future of Jobs Report 2025

4. LinkedIn Learning: Workplace Learning Report 2025

A CALL TO ACTION FOR ORGANIZATIONS:

# Rewrite your career support model for 2026

The future of career development demands bold rethinking, not incremental tweaks. Forward-thinking organizations are already experimenting with new models that embrace talent fluidity, give employees a digital portfolio of verified skills and use AI as a strategic teammate. Here's how to rethink your talent strategy and empower employees to navigate their careers in the process.



## Create experience pathways.

Climbing a single ladder doesn't work anymore. Instead, imagine a map with multiple paths, where growth happens by building skills, leading exciting projects and gaining varied experiences. Be upfront about flatter org charts and show people exactly how to grow across teams and functions. Create spaces where employees can proudly share what they've achieved and receive support whether they want to move up or sideways.



## Make skills the backbone of decisions and internal mobility.

Think of skills as currency everyone can collect and trade inside your company. Keep a clear, easy-to-access inventory of skills so employees know what's valued and where they fit best. Use digital skill portfolios so people can track growth, spotlight talent and help managers make smarter decisions about who works where and on what.



## Don't fear AI. Prepare for the changes it's bringing.

Help everyone understand what AI actually means for their day-to-day tasks, and take an integrated learning approach that combines theory with experimentation. Protect time for learning and make curiosity about AI part of your culture. When your people see AI as a "team member" that boosts their abilities, they'll approach work with more confidence and creativity.



## Reset the manager's role from control to active career navigation.

Give your managers practical guides, real-time skills data and the authority to support creative shifts. This approach requires you to reward leaders not just for retaining talent, but for how well they develop and partner with employees in crafting personalized growth plans and successful transitions within the organization.



## Take an experimental approach to career development.

Instead of rigid plans, design small, intentional career experiments that let employees explore different roles or skills to see what fits. Use these experiments to build short-term career plans focused on the experiences and skills they actually need. This approach stops career development from getting stuck in theory and helps create clear pathways that match both your company's needs and the employee's goals.



## Make real learning happen in the flow of work.

Make development a continuous loop by tying business initiatives and strategic projects directly to skills growth. Create recurring opportunities for employees to participate in mentorship, cross-functional assignments, AI pilot projects and peer-to-peer learning. Celebrate actual skill gains visible through results — not just hours spent in training.

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# Strategy in action: Structuring success around skills



**Companies across industries are proving what it looks like to build strategy around skills. Here are examples of how they're connecting employee ambitions with organizational needs.**

Volvo has done an impressive job of focusing on employees' skills by reimagining the company's entire organizational structure around its goal of becoming a fully electric company by 2030.<sup>5</sup> Volvo organized its structure around key business pillars — combustion engines and electric vehicles. This approach has allowed the company to prioritize the skills and training needed for each area.

American Express' "Navigator" platform encourages employees to create a personal career snapshot of their skills and goals they can share with leaders and mentors.<sup>6</sup> Managers and mentors then use these insights to lead meaningful, productive conversations that guide employees through real-world career twists.

**The future of work is here, and your business faces an urgent imperative to invest in your greatest asset — your people.**

The foundation for sustainable success is built on supporting leaders, empowering employees and rethinking career growth. Right Management delivers high-quality support to all candidates so you can trust they're receiving consistent guidance that aligns with where you're taking your business. This partnership actively builds the training and career navigation your leaders and employees need. Act now to develop the collective strength and adaptability your organization needs to thrive in 2026 and beyond.

5. Harvard Business School: Volvo Cars Retools Its Talent Strategy for an EV Future

6. Great Place to Work: Career Development: How to Get Employees to Own Their Career

## About the Report

A global talent development leader for over 40 years, Right Management is pleased to continue our tradition of delivering data-driven insights to clients with The State of Careers reports. We teamed up with Reputation Leaders to deliver insights on the state of careers across North America, LATAM, Europe and APAC. Our aim is to help HR executives and industry leaders make actionable and informed business decisions to ensure their employees grow and organizations thrive.

This report marks the first installment in our 2025 series and is grounded in an independently commissioned survey conducted between March 24 and April 25, 2025. The study gathered insights from 1,029 leaders and 2,402 employees across eight countries: the U.K., France, Brazil, Mexico, the U.S., Canada, Singapore and Australia. Drawing on Right Management's proprietary The State of Careers research, this report offers fresh perspectives on critical workforce challenges, equipping organizations with the insights needed to stay competitive for the long term.

## About the Studies Participants

- 2,402 white-collar employees; 1,029 leaders
- U.S. – 300; Canada – 101; Australia – 100; France – 109; Singapore – 101; Mexico – 111; Brazil – 104; UK – 102
- All from companies with over 1000 employees in North America and over 250 in other regions
- All from a mix of industries, including IT, financial and business services and industrials

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