2026 Workforce Outlook: Employers That Prioritize AI Literacy and Education Benefits Can Lead the Talent Race

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New research reveals skill gaps, retention drivers, and ROI on education benefits as AI reshapes work

NEWTON, Mass.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Dec. 4, 2025-- Rapid AI adoption is transforming the workplace, and the latest EdAssist by Bright Horizons (NYSE:BFAM) Education Index, conducted by The Harris Poll, makes one thing clear: the future of work will be defined by continuous learning, flexibility, and AI literacy. Employers who invest in education benefits now can gain a decisive advantage in retention, productivity, and innovation as 2026 approaches.

The report highlights a growing tension for workers between opportunity and risk. 42% of employees expect their role to change significantly due to AI within the next year, yet only 17% use AI frequently today, signaling a critical adoption gap. At the same time, 34% feel unprepared for AI-driven changes, and 42% say their employer expects them to learn AI on their own.

Meanwhile, pressure continues to surge with 79% of workers feeling they must learn new skills, and 32% saying AI has increased that pressure, up from 26% last year. Additionally, 81% report pressure to take on more work, and 80% feel they must deliver results faster, making flexibility and stress reduction an important employer consideration.

“AI is rewriting job descriptions faster than most organizations can keep up,” said Priya Krishnan, Chief Transformation Officer at Bright Horizons. “Employers who act now will not only close critical skill gaps but also build a culture of resilience and innovation. This is not about chasing trends but creating a workforce that thrives in a world where technology and human capability advance together. Education benefits, flexible learning, and AI literacy are the foundation for long-term competitiveness.”

The EdIndex also reveals what motivates today’s workforce: 85% of employees say they would be more loyal to an employer that invests in continuing education, and 55% say access to AI training or certification would make them more likely to stay. When employers provide AI training, adoption jumps to 76% compared to just 25% without support, proving the ROI of education benefits. Yet financial barriers remain a challenge, with 48% avoiding further education due to fear of student debt, reinforcing the need for affordable, employer-sponsored learning.

Looking ahead, the report outlines **five critical predictions for 2026** alongside how employers can act now to stay competitive:

- **AI literacy will become non-negotiable as automation reshapes nearly every role:** Employers should embed AI training into onboarding and ongoing development to ensure employees can confidently use emerging tools. Those who act early will close adoption gaps and position their workforce for innovation.
- **Upskilling will emerge as a top competitive advantage:** Organizations that invest in both technical and soft skills development will outperform peers in adaptability and innovation. Expanding programs to include leadership, critical thinking, and emerging tech skills will ensure long-term resilience.
- **Flexible education benefits will be a primary driver of retention**: As employees seek employers who remove financial barriers to learning, organizations should offer tuition assistance, debt-free programs, and micro-credentials. These benefits will strengthen loyalty and help attract top talent in a competitive market.
- **Continuous learning will be embedded into workplace culture:** Static skill sets will no longer suffice as technology and roles evolve rapidly. Employers must create structured career pathways and personalized learning plans that align with both business goals and employee aspirations to future-proof their workforce.
- **Work-life balance will become a strategic imperative:** Stress reduction and flexibility are key motivators for talent. Pairing education benefits with flexible schedules and mental health resources will improve engagement and retention while supporting overall well-being.

Success in 2026 will not hinge on technology alone; it will depend on how well employers prepare their employees. To learn more, download the full fifth annual Bright Horizons Education Index report here.

About the EdAssist by Bright Horizons Education Index

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bright Horizons among 2,017 US full-time/part-time employed adults aged 18+. The survey was conducted from July 31st – August 14th, 2025.

Data are weighted where necessary by age by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, employment, household income, and smoking status to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within ± 3.2 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

About EdAssist by Bright Horizons

Bright Horizons EdAssist Solutions® is a leading provider of workforce education solutions, reaching more than seven million adult learners through partnerships with more than 200 of the world's largest employers to deliver high-quality, affordable education programs designed to recruit, retain, and grow talent. In collaboration with over 200 post-secondary institutions in the U.S., EdAssist designs strategic education benefits programs that help build a talent pipeline for in-demand roles, fill skill gaps, and help companies develop the workforce necessary to innovate, grow, and compete in the global economy.

About Bright Horizons Family Solutions Inc.

Bright Horizons® is a leading global provider of high-quality early education and child care, back-up care, and workforce education services. For more than 35 years, we have partnered with employers to support workforces by providing services that help working families and employees thrive personally and professionally. Bright Horizons operates more than 1,000 early education and child care centers in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia and India, and serves more than 1,450 of the world's leading employers. Bright Horizons' early education and child care centers, back-up child and elder care, and workforce education programs help employees succeed at each life and career stage. For more information, go to www.brighthorizons.com.

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