



The Mobility Cliff: Why Learning Alone Isn't Enough for Career Advancement

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New data reveals strategic workforce education programs help bridge the gap between skill-building and career growth

NEWTON, Mass.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Aug. 4, 2026-- As economic uncertainty continues to shape workforce behavior, employees are seeking security and remaining with their current employer longer. However, new research shows this trend of “job hugging” or “strategically staying” doesn’t guarantee career progression.

According to the 2026 Education Index research study, commissioned by [EdAssist by Bright Horizons](#)® (NYSE:BFAM) and conducted by The Harris Poll, 77% of employed workers report they would prefer to remain with their current employer if clear internal advancement opportunities exist. However, while 83% of employees revealed they are motivated to learn new skills to advance their careers, 47% don’t know where to begin.

Organizations have responded to these shifting workforce dynamics by increasing offerings and investments in upskilling and workforce education programs. While these investments are helping employees build valuable skills, many organizations have an opportunity to more intentionally connect learning experiences to career advancement and internal mobility.

In fact, 80% of employees surveyed want confirmation from their employers that they are building the right skills for career progression.

Without specific program pathways for growth and active manager guidance, employees can encounter what may be described as a “mobility cliff” where newly acquired skills are not clearly connected to opportunities for advancement within the organization.

Education Investments Drives Retention

The research revealed 79% of workers would choose a job at a company that invests in continuing education over one that does not. Among those surveyed who have taken advantage of workplace education opportunities, 50% say they developed new skills that helped them with their current role, and 40% report their new skills helped advance their career.

Manager support plays a critical role in translating learning into advancement

While manager engagement plays a pivotal role in helping employees apply new skills, support is often inconsistent. The study found:

- 71% of employees wish their employer provided clearer steps to reach the next role.
- Employees with actively involved managers are significantly more likely to advance after completing training (43% vs. 28%).
- Despite 64% of employees saying their manager is involved in guiding skill development, only one-third (33%) report having had conversations about building relevant skills in the past year.
- While this is an increase from 28% in 2024, it is still indicative of a meaningful disconnect. Closing that gap represents a significant opportunity for employers.

“Investing in building the pipeline from within and encouraging on-going growth conversations between managers and employees is a strong example of how to connect business needs with meaningful career growth for employees. When learning is paired with clear pathways and manager support, employees are better positioned to turn new skills into career advancement,” stated Mandy Berman, Bright Horizons’ Chief Operating Officer, Back up Care and Education Advisory Services. “Leading organizations, such as [CVS Health](#) and [Synchrony](#), are now intentionally developing strategic workplace education programs that align with defined career pathways.”

For employers, the path forward is clear

Upskilling investments must be tightly aligned with visible internal career opportunities and reinforced through consistent manager support. By bridging the gap between education and mobility, employers can transform workforce development programs into a powerful driver of retention, deliver stronger returns on their investment, and build a more engaged, future-ready workforce.

To download the full Bright Horizons’ Education Index report, click [here](#).

Research Methodology

The research was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll between June 4 – 8, 2026, among 3,047 adults ages 18 and older – among whom 1,496 are employed full or part time (“employed adults”). Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, region, race/ethnicity, household income, education, marital status, size of household, and political party affiliation to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the

population.

Respondents are selected among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. The sample data is accurate to within ± 2.5 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.

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