

REPORT 05 · PEOPLE & LEADERSHIP

The AI Skills Gap Is Actually a Leadership Gap

Training budgets are up. Guidance from leaders isn't. The evidence keeps pointing at the same missing layer.

LEADERSHIP

SKILLS & TALENT

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

12 MIN READ

Every major workforce study of the last eighteen months describes the same shortfall from a different angle: employers are spending on upskilling, adoption is climbing, and the gap isn't closing. Read closely, the data says the missing ingredient isn't training capacity — it's leaders themselves: their fluency, their guidance, and their willingness to model the change they're asking for.

Training budgets are not the problem

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 — surveying over 1,000 employers representing 14 million workers — found 63% cite the skills gap as their primary barrier to transformation. Yet 85% of those same employers already plan to upskill their workforce, and 77% are providing AI-specific training. Separately, research with Cognizant found 94% of leaders face AI-critical skill shortages today, with one in three reporting gaps of 40% or more. The willingness to spend is not in question. The gap persists anyway.

Guidance is the missing input

BCG's AI at Work 2025 survey of over 10,600 workers across 11 countries found just 25% of frontline employees say their leaders provide enough guidance on AI — and where leadership is genuinely engaged, adoption and employee optimism are markedly higher. Only 13% say AI agents are integrated broadly into their workflows, and just a third say they understand how the agents they use actually function. That's not a training-content gap. It's an absence of the person whose job is to explain why it matters and show it working.

"Just 25% of frontline workers say their leaders provide enough guidance on AI."

— BCG, AI at Work 2025

Leadership structure is moving faster than leadership behavior

Organizations are visibly racing to formalize AI leadership: IBM's 2026 CEO study found 76% of surveyed organizations now have a chief AI officer, up from just 26% a year earlier — a near-tripling in twelve months. But appointing the role isn't the same as closing the gap it's meant to close. A separate 2026 benchmark survey by AI-and-data-leadership researcher Randy Bean found 93.2% of respondents cite "cultural challenges" — not technology — as the principal barrier to AI adoption. The org chart is catching up to the moment faster than the behavior underneath it is.

The skill itself is leadership — and it's moving down the org chart

Perhaps the clearest sign of what's actually scarce: PwC's 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer found entry-level, AI-exposed roles in the US are now roughly seven times more likely to require traditionally senior-level skills — judgment, prioritization, communication — than roles were before. The market is pricing "leadership-shaped" capability at every level, not just the top. Meanwhile, LinkedIn's 2025 Workplace Learning Report found 49% of L&D professionals say their own executives are concerned employees lack the

skills to execute business strategy — leadership development remains the single most common career initiative (71% of organizations offer it), yet only a minority of "career development champions" deploy it systematically enough to move the needle.

The data

FINDING	SOURCE	YEAR
94% of leaders face AI-critical skill shortages; 1 in 3 report gaps of 40%+	WEF / Cognizant research	2025–26
63% of employers cite the skills gap as the primary transformation barrier; 85% plan to upskill, 77% to provide AI training	WEF, Future of Jobs Report	2025
Only 25% of frontline workers say leaders give enough guidance on AI; 13% say agents are broadly integrated	BCG, AI at Work 2025	2025
76% of organizations have a chief AI officer, up from 26% a year earlier	IBM Institute for Business Value, CEO Study	2026
93.2% cite "cultural challenges," not technology, as the principal AI adoption barrier	Randy Bean, AI & Data Leadership Benchmark Survey	2026
Entry-level AI-exposed roles ~7x more likely to require senior-level skills like judgment	PwC, 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer	2026
49% of L&D professionals say execs doubt employees have needed skills; leadership development offered by 71% of orgs	LinkedIn, Workplace Learning Report	2025

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Line up these findings and the "skills gap" framing starts to look like a category error. Employers aren't withholding training — 85% are actively upskilling. What's missing is the person modeling and sponsoring the change: guidance, visible use, and the judgment to say what AI should and shouldn't touch. That's a leadership-development problem wearing a technical-training costume, and it explains why appointing a chief AI officer, on its own, hasn't closed the gap it was meant to close — the role changes the org chart, not automatically the behavior underneath it.

Where CometX fits

If the gap is leadership fluency and sponsorship, not training volume, three CometX practices meet it directly:

01 Training & capacity building

Inclusive-leadership programs and coached cohorts built for leaders themselves — the fluency layer the data says is missing, not another module for frontline staff.

02 EDIA & women's advancement

Sponsorship programs that move equity-deserving staff into the senior roles now expected to carry AI-inflected judgment — widening, not narrowing, who gets to lead through this shift.

03 Consulting & advisory

A leadership-readiness diagnostic and theory of change that names what "enough guidance" looks like for your organization, and how you'll know in six months whether it's happening.

Request a proposal

Explore training & capacity building →

SOURCES

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- 3. Boston Consulting Group, "AI at Work 2025: Momentum Builds, But Gaps Remain", June 2025.
- 4. IBM Institute for Business Value, 2026 CEO Study, chief AI officer findings, as reported by CNBC, May 2026.
- 5. Randy Bean, AI & Data Leadership Executive Benchmark Survey 2026, as reported by TechEchelon, 2026.
- 6. PwC, 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer, June 2026.
- 7. LinkedIn, Workplace Learning Report 2025, as reported by LearnExperts and LinkedIn Learning, 2025.

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