

Bridging the Gap: Supporting a New Generation of Leaders

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Foreword

Ann Francke OBE, CMgr CCMi FIC | CEO, CMI



The youth unemployment figures dominating our headlines are not due to the individual failure of welfare, education or employment policy; they are rather the result of combined, significant shortfalls across all three systems which reinforce the devastating result: a million young people classified as NEETs. The numbers speak for themselves.

Let us discard the lazy, outdated myth of the 'entitled' or 'unambitious' young person. This is a cohort whose formative years have been severely disrupted by global lockdowns, economic upheaval and an AI revolution, all in the space of half a decade, and all affecting the workplace in unique and unpredictable ways.

We must face the reality of the data. CMI's latest research pinpoints a generation that, despite its willingness, is simply not prepared for the realities of the workplace. Both managers and young people acknowledge glaring gaps in essential skills: resilience, professional communication and basic expectations of workplace behaviour. This readiness gap doesn't just hamper their chances of securing that crucial first job; it stunts their progression once they are through the door.

Young people deserve a vastly better offer from educators, employers and the government. They need the opportunity to acquire core, early leadership skills before the job hunt even begins. At CMI, we know this works. We have the positive impact data on equipping students with practical management skills alongside their studies, through dual accreditation, diplomas and apprenticeships. It gives them a measurable edge and sets them up for success.

But we cannot ignore the uncomfortable inverse question: are our workplaces actually ready for today's young people?

You can give a young worker all the employability skills in the world, but if you drop them into a team led by an 'accidental manager' – someone promoted for technical competence but given zero formal management training – they will not flourish. A poor frontline manager will quickly destroy a young person's confidence, causing them to fall out of the workforce entirely or stagnate in unfulfilling, low-paid roles.

This tells us there is vital work to be done on both sides of the interview table. Employers must stop treating early-career onboarding as a box-ticking HR exercise. If you want to harness the innovation of a new generation, invest in their development and that of their managers to retain them and focus their fresh perspectives on the big strategic questions your organisation faces. Investing in the core tenets of professional leadership at every level is a proven business investment that will pay dividends in capable future leaders and long-term economic success.

Let me thank everyone who has shared their experiences and insights with this project. The solutions are never straight-forward and quick fixes don't exist. However, to do nothing – as employers, educators, or policymakers – is to risk a lost generation.

Ann Francke OBE, CMgr CCMi FIC | CEO, CMI

Executive Summary

The UK is facing a structural crisis in how young people transition from education into the workplace. This extends far beyond the 1 million young people aged 16 to 24 identified in Alan Milburn's recently released report who are classified as not in education, employment or training (NEETs). This challenge speaks to the quality of jobs that graduates and school leavers alike can access. It highlights what is standing in their way not just to get a job, but to successfully bed in with an organisation to build a career path toward becoming future leaders.

The key barriers identified are not specific to any one job description or role. They are cross-cutting, transferable skills and most often referred to as 'soft skills'. In reality, they are **core leadership skills**.

The rewards for the UK economy of addressing this crisis at pace cannot be understated. The reach goes far beyond a NEET cohort and a soaring welfare bill. For young people still in education, it is about gaining the tools and confidence to chase opportunities and stand out from other candidates when they enter the workforce. For those currently in early-career work, it is a chance to make the most of every opportunity and to see a progression route, to better understand how to harness their talent and signal their ambition.

This report draws upon the constructive views of thousands of managers working across the UK economy alongside nationally representative polling from YouGov of young people between the ages of 18-24. It includes the findings from in-depth interviews and focus groups with young people, both those not yet in work and those in the early days of their careers. It also includes the collaborative contributions of leading employers, providers and further education colleges towards designing new interventions. Collectively, it creates a clear view of where the gaps lie and, more importantly, what needs to happen to start filling them in.



Key findings:

The data paints a concerning picture of a core workplace and leadership skills deficit:

61%

of managers agree that younger workers in their organisation are more likely to lack these so-called 'soft skills' compared to other age groups.

91%

believe their overall workforce performance is negatively affected by this gap in basic leadership skills in the workforce.

Key findings continued:

Managers overwhelmingly prioritise foundational personal attributes and professional conduct when asked to identify skills gaps. 63% of managers cite a lack of resilience, followed by professionalism (45%), clear communication (43%) and the capacity to accept and act upon feedback (41%).

Yet there is a clear discrepancy between employer expectations and young people's perceptions. Despite what managers report, polling by YouGov for CMI found that young people self-assess themselves on the same core leadership skills much more positively. For example, 45% of 18-24 year-olds said they felt they were equipped with self-management skills to a large extent when entering the workforce, but only 6% of managers said that a similar cohort (16-24 year-olds) demonstrated these skills to that extent.

This speaks to a growing disconnect in understanding what these skills involve in a work setting. As a result seven in ten young people believe employers hold a negative bias towards their generation.

Young people do not lack ambition, with 64% actively wanting to progress into management or leadership roles. Overcoming self-doubt and building professional confidence alongside practical work skills are their top priorities.

There is a level of maturity and self-awareness in young people leaving formal education, with 78% of young people feeling that their education focused too heavily on academic theory rather than the practical skills required to succeed in a job. Identified areas of weakness among those already in work include how to speak to colleagues, manage disagreements or understand basic office etiquette.

While acknowledged as 'digital natives', young recruits themselves identify a clear digital skills gap when it comes to using professional technology tools rather than personal use applications, including appropriate use of AI at work, spreadsheets, email and grasping data security requirements.

83% of young people agree they would feel much more confident stepping into a leadership role if they had a formal mentor or professional body supporting them.

A clear and disproportionate burden is falling on first-line managers who are often without the training they need to support these entrants to the workforce. This is an identified retention risk and significant cost to employers.

A lack of work experience and mentoring opportunities is severely limiting the ability of young people to gain a better understanding of workplace expectations. Employers are not playing a big enough role in demystifying the world of work.

86%

of employed young people agree that it is important their line manager has received training on how to properly support and guide someone at the start of their career.

89%

of managers who had received training believe it enabled them to better support and develop new hires and younger employees.

CMI is uniquely positioned to support both young people and the managers tasked with integrating them successfully into work. Building on these findings, CMI has specifically designed its Future Leaders suite of tools to support both early career confidence and managerial success for new recruits:

✔ Leadership Essentials:

Designed for those who are not yet in work, but may be studying or on an apprenticeship. This programme focuses on demystifying the workplace, translating learning from training into practical skills and helping them feel confident and ready before they step into their first role, thereby reducing the future onboarding burden for employers.

✔ Aspiring Leaders:

Designed for those already in their formative years in the workplace, such as apprentices or those in their first jobs. This programme boosts existing skills, helping them to map out their career trajectory, build resilience and gain the confidence to take on more responsibilities without needing constant managerial intervention.

- ✔ The **CMI Leadership Academy suite** offers managers, notably first-line managers, the training they need to ensure early-role recruits are nurtured and inspired to not just remain in work, but to thrive and find a professional career path.



Research Methodology

This report uses a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative polling and deep-dive qualitative insights.

- To explore the firsthand experiences and challenges of young people entering the workplace, a two-pronged qualitative study was deployed in March and April 2026:
 - Youth CoLabs: 4 qualitative focus groups conducted with a total of 20 young people aged 18-25, recruited via CMI channels.
 - In-depth interviews: 20 external qualitative in-depth interviews with young people aged 18-24, sampled to represent those in education or on their early-career path.
- To understand employer perspectives, quantitative data was drawn from CMI's regular polling of UK working managers via the May 2026, January 2026 and July 2025 Managers' Voice Polls. This was supplemented by CoLab focus groups of leading employers and further education colleges conducted in May 2026.
- To capture the perspective of the emerging workforce, CMI commissioned YouGov to conduct a dedicated quantitative, nationally representative study between 27th May and 3rd June 2026 of 514 young people aged 18-24.



Introduction

The transition into the workplace for young people is arguably at one of its most challenging moments in recent memory. The acknowledged issue of rising economic inactivity is just one facet of a wider picture that includes young people leaving formal education without the confidence to pursue their ambitions. They are lacking everyday workplace skills that ensure a smooth first rung on the career ladder – the very attributes that support retention. These include self-management skills such as appropriate workplace behaviours, how to respond to feedback, how to operate in a professional environment and how to communicate clearly. While these skills come with many descriptors, they lie at the heart of core leadership attributes.

For young workers with the ambition and desire to find their path into leadership roles, these skills are ever more vital. An early understanding of what good leadership looks like, and what the expectations are for aspiring leaders, will help inform how they integrate into the workforce and improve their chances of early success.

Alongside what employers tell us are significant skills gaps in new hires, there has been an erosion of early stepping stones that once aided a young person's integration into the labour market. For example, the proportion of 16- to 17-year-old students engaging in any work – be it a Saturday job or a part-time role – has plummeted from 35% in 2006 to just 19% today¹.

The march of technology has also affected that early-career experience. Young people attempting to enter the workforce face an increasingly formalised and remote recruitment landscape that can disadvantage those with limited experience. The rise of artificial intelligence-driven tools, such as automated CV screening and recorded video interviews, is filtering out young talent based on keywords and preventing them from making a human connection.

This means that they are frequently entering the workforce with elevated anxiety and low confidence borne of inexperience and impersonal encounters with job searches. For employers, this translates to a widening gap between modern workplace demands and the work-readiness of new entrants.

This report explores this fundamental disconnect and what steps can be taken to bridge the gap. By examining the realities facing both employers and young people today, it sets out concrete steps for young people, educational institutions, training providers and employers to take together to strengthen that bridge between education and employment.

CMI has more than a decade worth of experience in supporting students prepare for their working lives while also gaining their academic grounding. Our dual accreditation of degrees across a range of disciplines produces graduates who are work-ready. Their outcomes speak for themselves with 87% of students agreeing that CMI accreditation makes them more employable, and 89% of students state that a dual-accredited degree specifically helps them develop those crucial employability skills².

The national challenge of youth unemployment and underemployment tells us that this opportunity needs to be extended to young people on the cusp of the labour market and to those who have taken their tentative first steps into the workforce. By giving them core employability skills through early leadership training and placing them on a path to achieve Foundation Chartered Manager (fCMgr) status, they will move forward with the confidence they need to both gain employment and stand out once they arrive in their first jobs.

This report also explores the significant need for employers to audit the skills of the managers who are charged with onboarding and supporting young workers. Without the benefit of structured management training – the chance to gain skills such as managing conflict, giving feedback and setting clear expectations – the chances of creating a positive, successful first workplace experience are diminished in the hands of a novice, untrained manager. For employers, costs rise as retention rates fall and both the young new hires and their early-career line managers are ill-prepared and left disillusioned.

¹ Department for Work & Pensions (2026), [Young people and work: interim report](#)

² CMI (2024), UK Dual Accreditation student survey

“

Young people thrive when they have a structured pathway and a clear line of sight to professional recognition. Providing early-career talent with an employer-recognised stamp of capability, like CMI's new routes to Chartered status, gives them immediate authenticity and a sense of belonging. When we pair formal development with a clear professional body pathway, we see immediate dividends in their confidence, retention and desire to step up as future leaders.

Jon Hornagold CMgr MCI,
Apprenticeship Manager at Amey

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We can't expect young people to thrive in the workplace if the managers welcoming them in don't yet have the skills to coach, give meaningful feedback, or handle difficult conversations well. If we're serious about early careers retention, we need to invest in structured management development much earlier, helping 'accidental managers' become confident, thoughtful leaders who create the kind of environment people want to stay and grow in.

Lisa Pinfield,
Group Talent Director, People Function, Capita

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I am really excited about this CMI initiative because the programme hits a lot of the right spots for what our business currently needs. Furthermore, providing these young people with a recognised badge to put on their CVs at the end of the process is an incredibly important addition.

Gaye Glading,
Early Careers & Development Manager, FCC Recycling (UK) Ltd

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The proposed content for these programmes is absolutely bang on the money for addressing the current challenges in early career recruitment. This initiative will crucially help bridge the gap by supporting line managers as they navigate how to help young people demonstrate these essential workplace skills.

Natalie Evans,
Apprenticeships Lead, ASDA

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Young people need opportunities that allow them to build skills, be inquisitive, conduct research, and present their findings. Learning to accept constructive critique is an essential part of building their resilience.

Gaye Glading,
Early Careers & Development Manager, FCC Recycling (UK) Ltd

“

The move from education into the workplace can feel like quite an emotional shift for this generation. Programmes that offer clear, recognised credentials like Foundation Chartered Manager status really help. They give people a credible sense of progress, make the workplace feel less mysterious, and build the confidence they need to back themselves and navigate those early career steps.

Lisa Pinfield,
Group Talent Director, People Function, Capita

“

A significant challenge lies in helping managers navigate the complex needs of young people entering the workforce. It must be a collaborative partnership where we provide the right opportunities for both the manager and the employee to succeed.

Natalie Evans,
Apprenticeships Lead, ASDA

“

Providing tangible recognition, such as formal CMI certification that young people can add to their CVs, is incredibly important for their early career progression.

Gaye Glading,
Early Careers & Development Manager, FCC Recycling (UK) Ltd

“

There is a misconception among line managers that young people inherently possess strong digital skills. While they may excel at social media, they often lack the specific digital competencies required in a professional workplace setting.

Natalie Evans,
Apprenticeships Lead, ASDA

“

Managing expectations and setting realistic timeframes is absolutely key for young people entering the workforce, especially when they have aspirations of reaching executive roles quickly.

Gaye Glading,
Early Careers & Development Manager, FCC Recycling (UK) Ltd

01

The Employer Reality: A Challenge in Workplace Readiness

Organisations today are facing a notable shortage of work-ready talent. The global skills shortage is well documented, with 76% of UK employers reporting difficulty recruiting skilled talent³. Highly sought-after transferable skills include reliability, resilience, adaptability and critical thinking. Yet, there is a stark contrast between what employers need and what young people are equipped with upon entering the workplace.

The data paints a concerning picture of a core workplace and leadership skills deficit: 61% of managers agree that younger workers in their organisation are more likely to lack these so-called 'soft skills' compared to other age groups, and 91% believe their overall workforce performance is negatively affected by this gap in soft skills in the workforce⁴. While 98% of managers note that 16-24 year-olds are equipped with digital skills to any extent, just half (52%) say that young people – often viewed as “digital natives” – have digital skills to a large extent⁵.



This highlights a really interesting contradiction: while managers highly rate young people's digital skills, young people themselves see this as a particular area they need to improve. Young people may be digital natives and digitally competent in their private lives, but our qualitative research with young people revealed a lack of confidence and knowledge of applying digital skills in a professional environment. From understanding the appropriate use of AI at work to add value, to using workplace tools such as Microsoft Office or Power BI, to email etiquette and data security protocols, young people do not have the same faith in their digital skills that managers do.

Estimations of digital prowess aside, managers have identified a lack of fundamental workplace behaviours in young workers. They report extremely low levels of competence in innovation and creativity (with only 18% say this exists “to a large extent”), and only one in ten managers rate young employees' abilities in communication (12%), team-working (11%), flexibility and adaptability (10%), critical thinking and problem solving (8%), self-management (6%), initiative and self-direction (5%) and resilience (5%)⁶.

³ ManpowerGroup (2025), [2025 UK Talent Shortage](#)

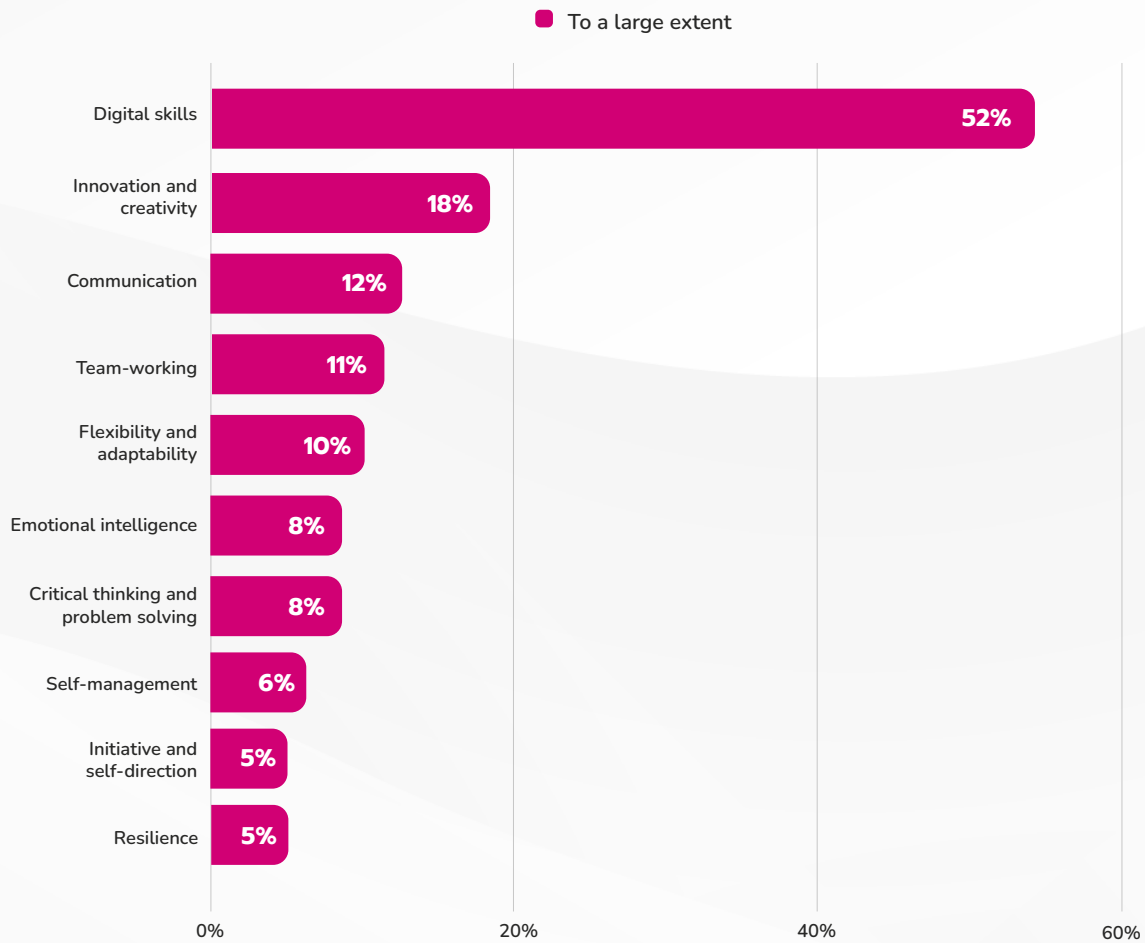
⁴ CMI (2025), July 2025 Managers' Voice Poll

⁵ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

⁶ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll



Managers' ratings of skills that 16-24 year olds are equipped with to a large extent in their organisation when entering the workplace



(Base: n=1,061 managers except those who are self-employed or have no employees, CMI Poll 2026)

While complete proficiency is not expected upon entry, the consistently low rating across these skills represents a justified cause for concern, creating significant ramifications for both early-career professionals and the managers tasked with their development. Only a third (37%) think that young people are equipped with these skills overall to at least a moderate extent, and over half (56%) say they are only equipped to a small extent⁷.

This deficit in fundamental workplace behaviours clearly directs management focus towards the most urgent areas for intervention. When asked what skills young people must improve most, managers overwhelmingly prioritise foundational personal attributes and professional conduct. Resilience tops the list, cited by 63% of managers, immediately followed by professionalism (45%), clear communication (43%) and the capacity to accept and act upon feedback (41%). This pattern of concern extends to core organisational competencies; significant minorities highlighted the need for improvement in reliability (36%) and effective time management and prioritisation (36%). Critically, higher-order skills essential for business growth are identified as lacking, with over three in ten managers pointing to problem-solving and independent/creative thinking (32%) and initiative and proactivity (30%) as requiring the most attention⁸.

⁷ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

⁸ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

Managers' selections of top five skills young people aged 16-24 should improve most

Larger words have greater prevalence, from Resilience (63%) to Digital literacy (7%).



(Base: n=1,139 managers, CMI Poll 2026)



Matt Brittin, commenting in his capacity as Guardian Non Executive Director and former President of Google EMEA in October 2025, gave CMI his one piece of feedback for young future leaders:

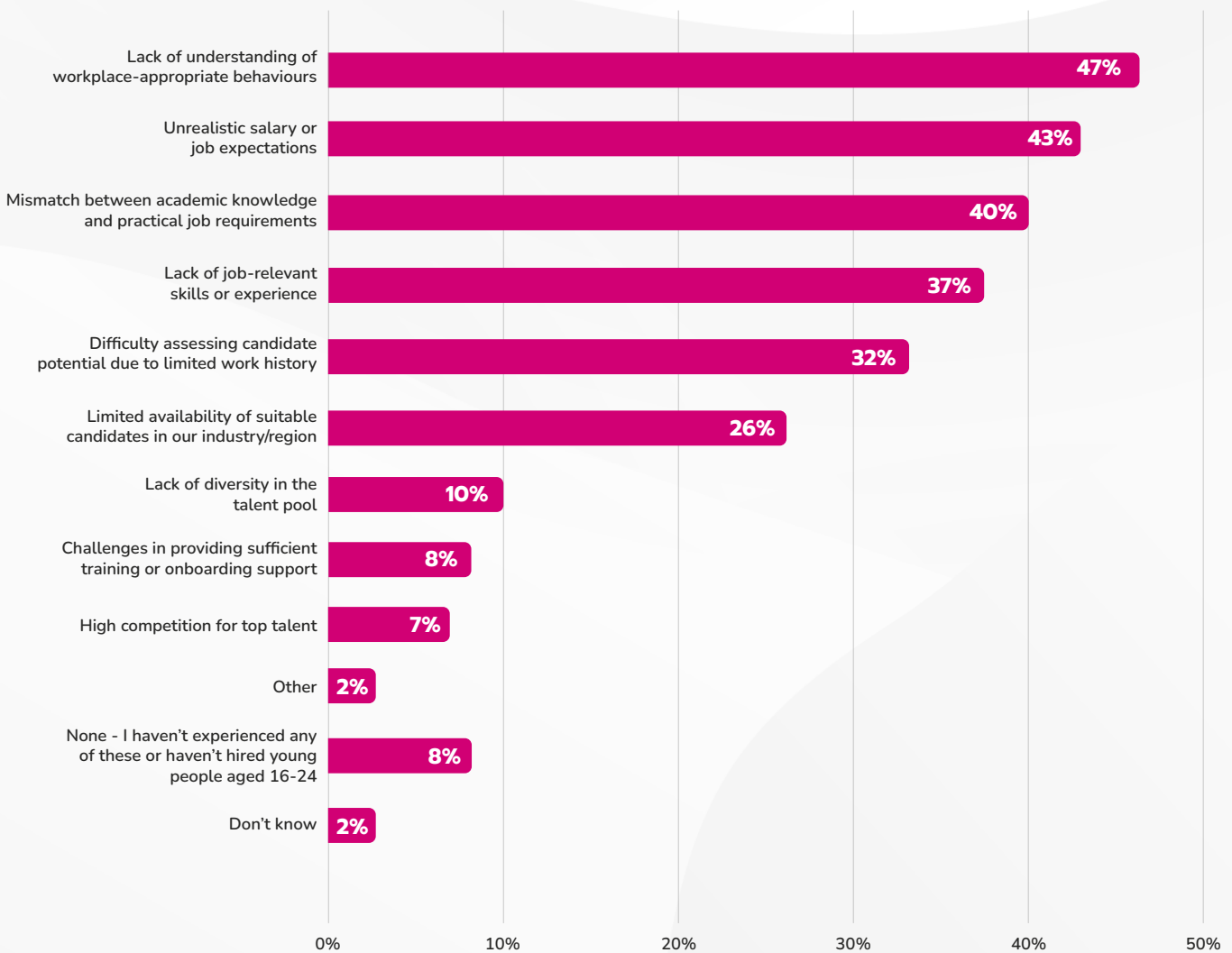
“

In a world of technology, automation and change, the best thing you can do is be more human... Empathy, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, curiosity, communication, collaboration – those skills are really important.

Managerial strain

This lack of work-readiness translates into a heavy operational burden. Managers are increasingly facing difficulties managing conduct and performance from day one. When hiring young people, 47% of managers say they see a lack of understanding regarding workplace-appropriate behaviours, 43% face candidates with unrealistic salary or job expectations and 40% see a clear mismatch between academic knowledge and practical job requirements. Over a third (37%) cite that young people joining their organisation lack job-relevant skills or experience⁹.

Managers' experiences when hiring young people aged 16-24



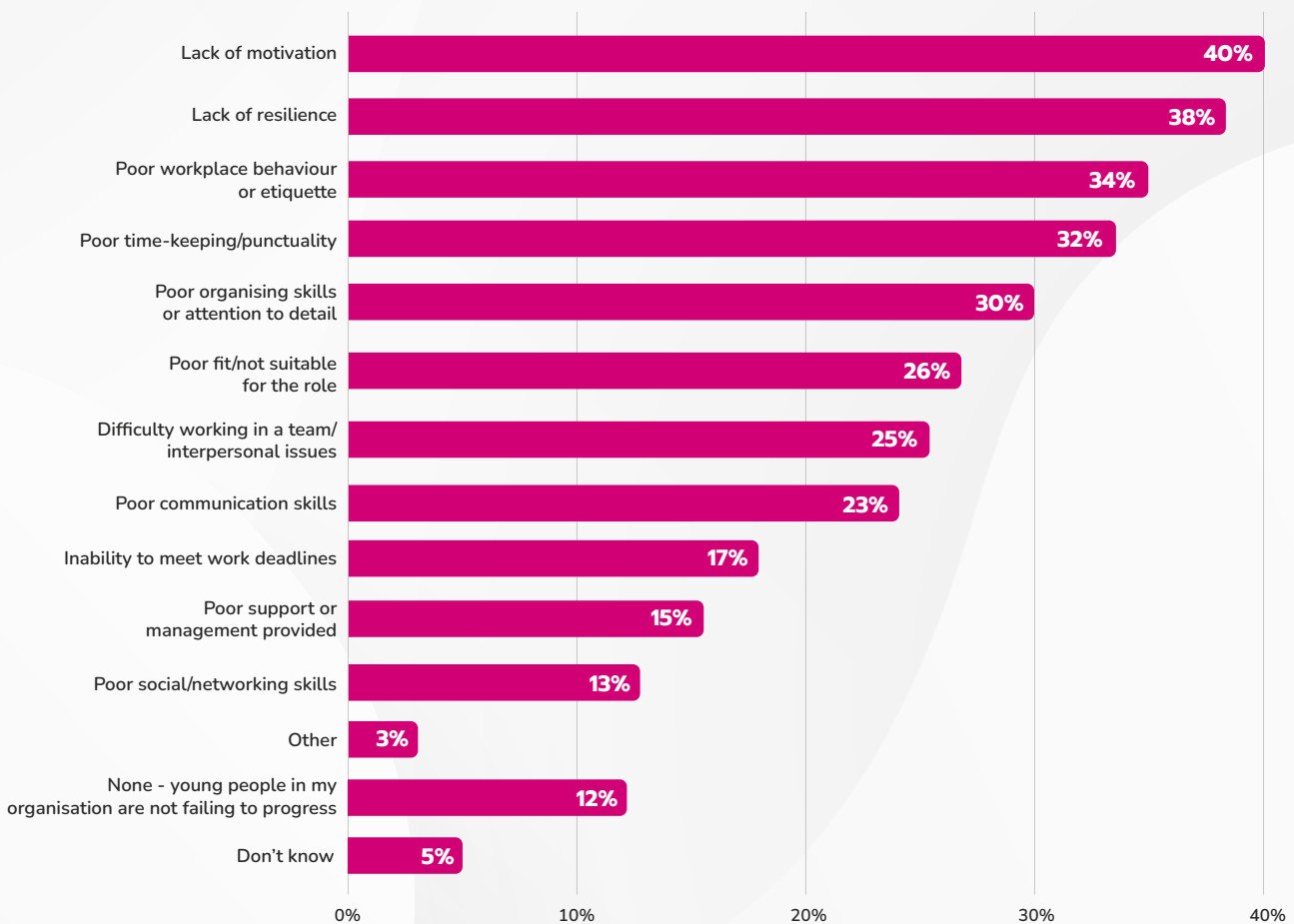
(Base: n=718 managers who have hiring responsibility, CMI Poll 2026)

⁹ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

Failing to progress

The financial and operational costs of this disconnect are severe. Just one in 10 managers (12%) say that young people in their organisation are progressing as expected. When young people fail to progress or do not pass their probation, managers cite a lack of motivation (40%), a lack of resilience (38%), poor workplace behaviour or etiquette (34%) and poor time-keeping (32%) as the most common causes. Other reasons include poor organising skills or attention to detail (30%), difficulty working in a team (25%) and poor communication skills (23%)¹⁰. As these failings translate into high turnover, they lead to costly cycles of recruitment and onboarding, forcing managers to spend disproportionate amounts of time managing basic conduct and addressing core deficiencies rather than driving career progression of younger employees that drives business performance.

Common causes of young people aged 16-24 failing to progress or pass probation in organisations



(Base: n=1,043 managers except those who are self-employed or have no employees, or do not have 16-24 year-olds in their workplace, CMI Poll 2026)




Baroness Minouche Shafik, Chief Economic Advisor to UK Prime Minister, and Former Deputy Governor of Markets and Banking at the Bank of England, shared this advice with CMI for those in their early-career phase:

Once you've got your foot in the door, I think it's really important to signal to your boss that you're open to learning and doing more.

¹⁰ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

Whose job is it to fix?

Interestingly, there is a significant expectation gap regarding whose job it is to fix this general issue. When asked who holds the greatest responsibility for preparing young people (specifically those aged 18-24 not in education, employment or training) for the workplace, 74% of managers point to educational institutions, and 73% believe the responsibility lies with the young people themselves. In stark contrast, only 35% of managers rank employers or workplaces as holding this responsibility¹¹.



Dame Amanda Blanc DBE, group CEO at Aviva talking to CMI about the importance of employers investing in training their managers:

“

If you want to be a leader, then let's make sure that you can be the best leader you can possibly be and that you know how to manage people and yourself. And you've got to practise. Leadership takes practice.



¹¹ CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

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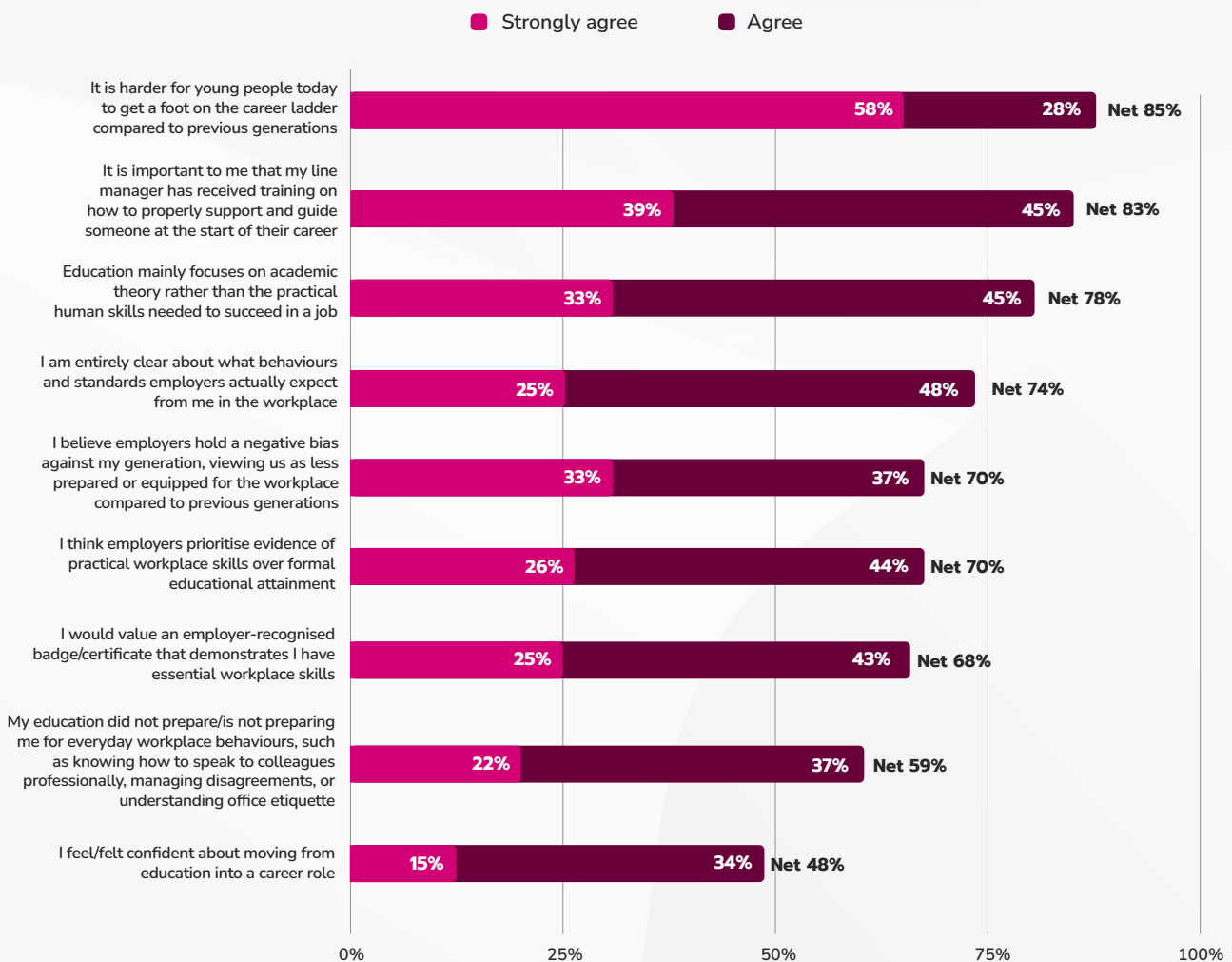
The Youth Reality: Navigating the Transition

To truly solve the employer skills gap and relieve the pressure on managers in taking on younger workers, we must understand the lived reality of the young people attempting to navigate the transition into work.

Data commissioned by CMI from YouGov illustrates this reality, capturing the direct perspective of the emerging workforce. This new data shows that there is a technical gap that is symptomatic of a broader disconnect between academic experience and the realities of modern professional environments.

A noteworthy 78% of young people feel that their education focused too heavily on academic theory rather than the practical human skills required to succeed in a job. This leaves them entering the workforce with significant trepidation; fewer than half (48%) feel confident moving from education into a career. A lack of exposure to everyday workplace behaviours is a primary driver of this anxiety, with 61% of young people in paid employment agreeing that their education failed to prepare them for professional life, how to speak to colleagues, manage disagreements or understand basic office etiquette¹².

Perceptions of transitioning from education into the workplace by young people aged 18-24

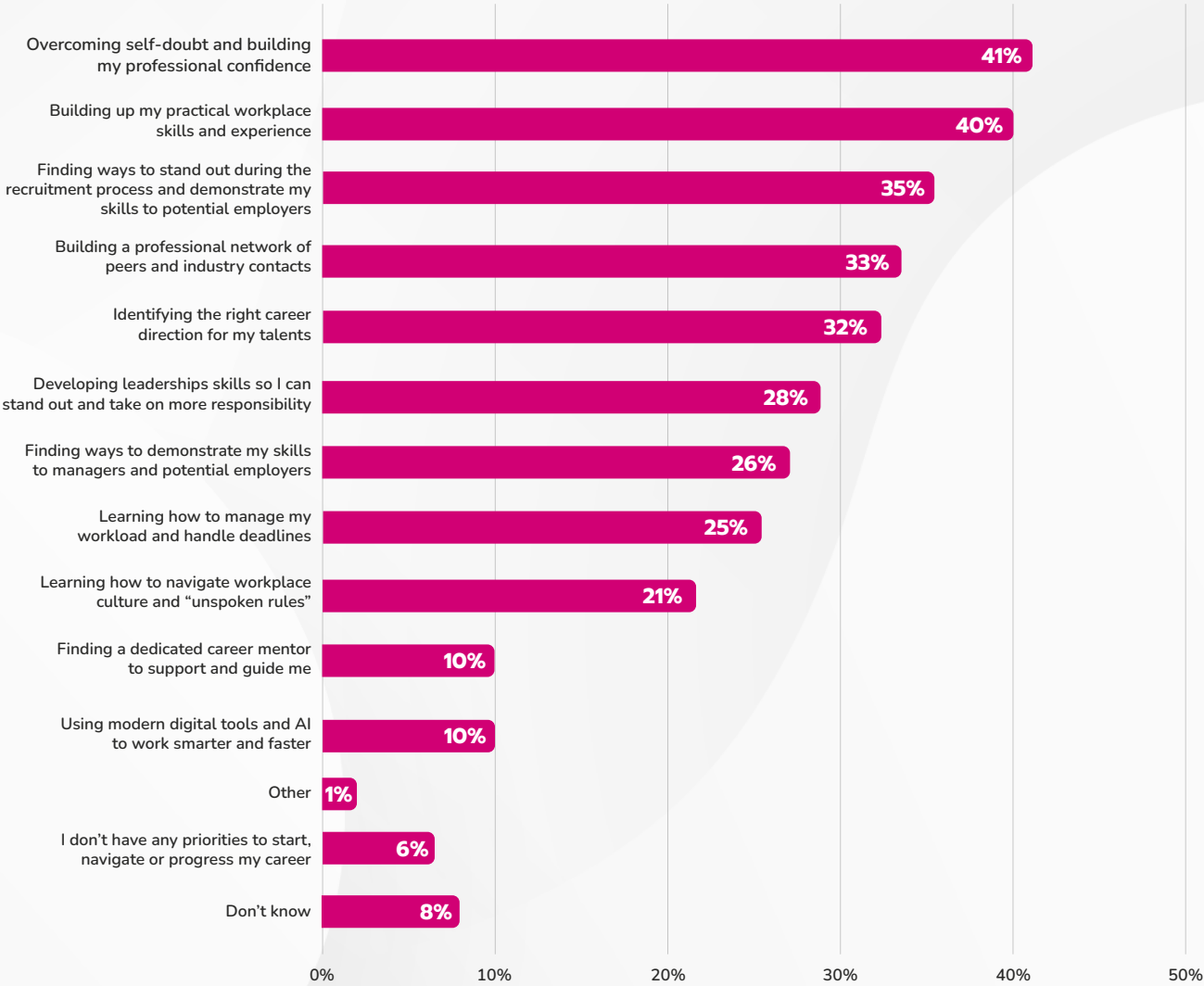


(Base: n=514 young people, YouGov Poll 2026)

¹² YouGov (2026), Poll of young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI

This transition is further complicated by a sense of external friction. Young people are acutely aware of the hurdles they face, with 85% believing it is harder to get a foot on the career ladder today than it was for previous generations. Recognising this shift, young people are keenly aware of the changing expectations in the hiring market as 70% think employers prioritise evidence of practical workplace skills over formal education attainment. Perhaps more disheartening is the perception of bias: 70% of young people feel that employers hold a negative bias against their generation, viewing them as less prepared or equipped for the workplace. This creates a defensive, high-pressure start; young people cite overcoming self-doubt and building professional confidence (41%) and building practical skills (40%) as their top priorities for starting or progressing in their career, followed closely by the desire to stand out during the recruitment process (35%)¹³.

Top priorities of young people aged 18-24 when thinking about starting, navigating or progressing in their career



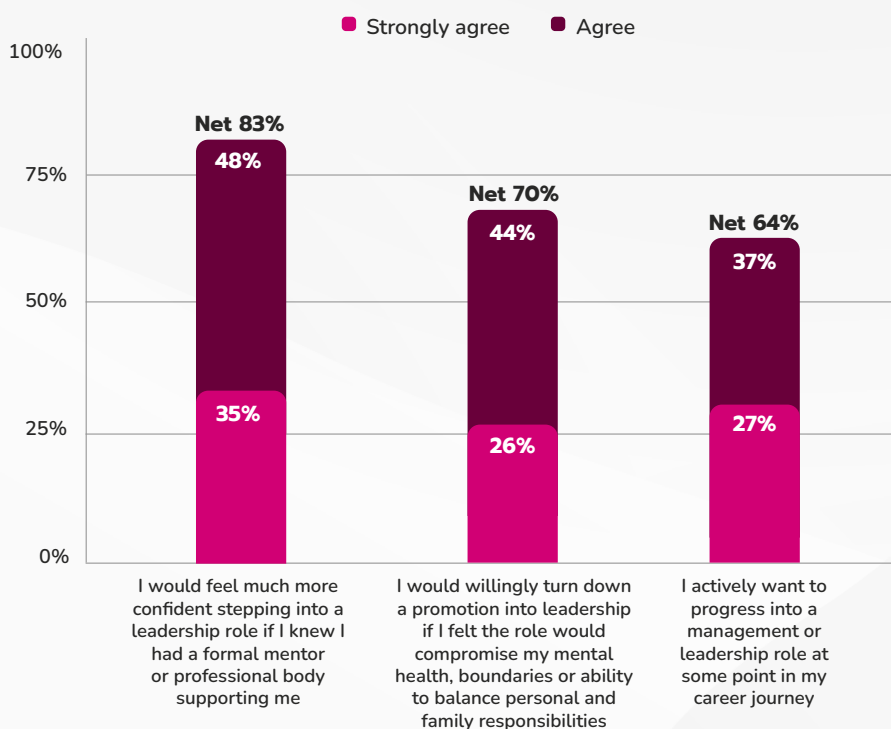
(Base: n=514 young people, YouGov Poll 2026)

¹³ YouGov (2026), Poll of young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI

Underpinning these aspirations is a clear recognition of the capabilities they need to cultivate; young people identify problem-solving and independent / creative thinking (37%), communication (32%) and attention to detail and accuracy (31%) as the most critical skills for their long-term career success¹⁴.

Despite this pressure, their ambition remains high, with 64% actively wanting to progress into management or leadership roles. However, they are approaching these goals with a heightened sense of caution and a need for structural scaffolding. While 83% agree they would feel much more confident stepping into a leadership role if they had a formal mentor or professional body supporting them, young people are also prioritising their well-being; 70% state that they would willingly turn down a promotion if it compromised their mental health, boundaries or ability to balance personal responsibilities. To navigate this landscape, they are actively looking for concrete validation, with 68% stating they would value an employer-recognised badge or certificate that demonstrates their essential workplace skills¹⁵.

Perception of future career and leadership aspirations by young people aged 18-24



(Base: n=514 young people, YouGov poll 2026)

Given this need for tangible, practical support and the desire to build confidence, it is perhaps unsurprising that they struggle to navigate the resources currently available to them. When seeking career support, young people are met with a fragmented and often frustrating landscape. While they naturally gravitate towards social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram for accessible, bite-sized “day in the life” content, they remain acutely aware that such advice can be unverified, opinion-based or over-glamourised. Furthermore, only 8% completely trust social media to give credible and accurate career guidance¹⁶. Conversely, while formal e-learning platforms and government career hubs are trusted, young people worry that standard online certificates are losing their value as a reliable indicator of capability, and find the guidance too generic to reflect their specific goals. The most significant gap across these current resources is the glaring lack of practical application; most platforms focus heavily on academic theory or technical skills, leaving young people to navigate vital workplace nuances – such as managing corporate politics, handling conflict and displaying professional etiquette – largely through trial and error.

¹⁴ YouGov (2026), Poll of young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI

¹⁵ YouGov (2026), Poll of young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI

¹⁶ YouGov (2026), Poll of young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI

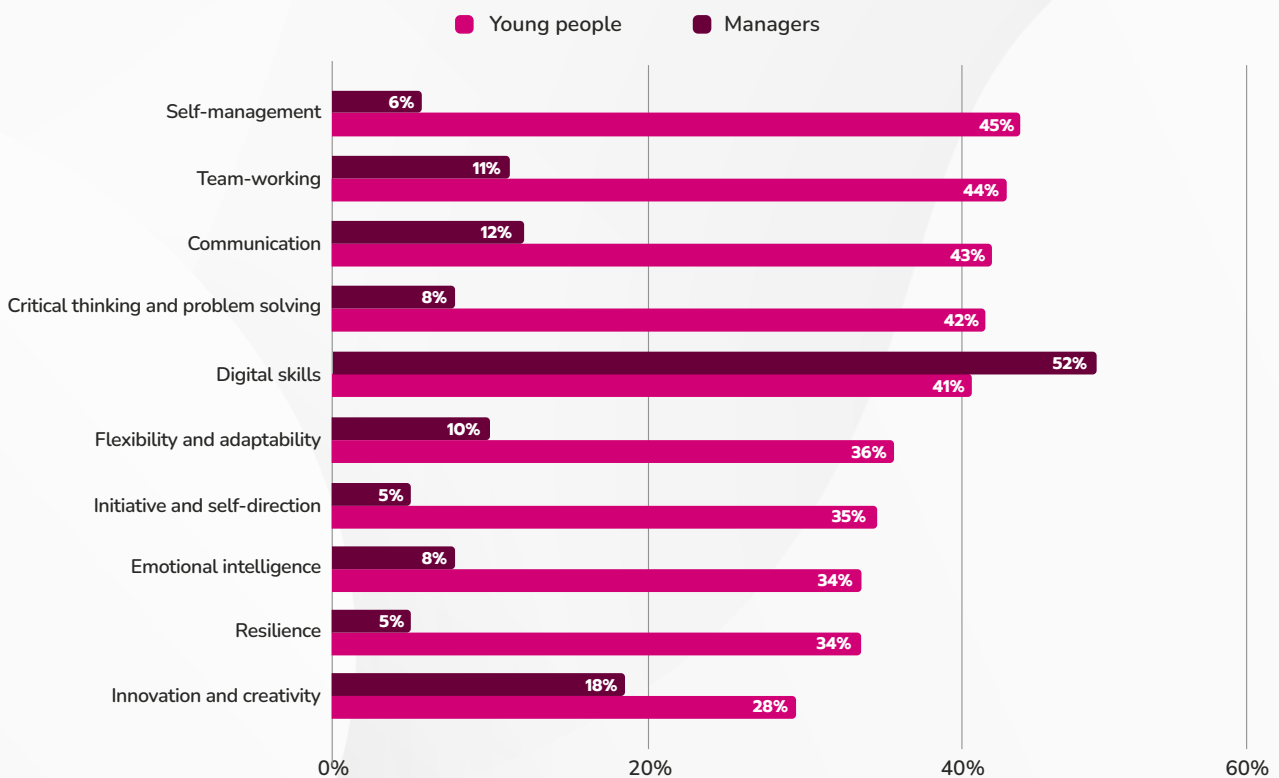
CMI's youth survey data also highlights a clear divergence in how young people perceive their readiness for the workplace compared to the opinion of managers. As illustrated in the chart below and earlier in this report, managers report a significant deficit in essential core leadership skills of young people entering the workforce. However, young people self-assess themselves on the same metrics much more positively. Interestingly, it is only in digital skills, as mentioned earlier, where young people rate their skills to be less advanced than managers do – which speaks to the distinction between personal digital skills and workplace needs around specific tools and the appropriate use of AI.

“

I think [digital fluency and data security] are a differentiation point. When you have so many projects that rely on having IT skills, whether that be Excel, Power BI and things like that, you become a point of dependence within the team. If you have those capabilities, you're able to stand out and just show your competence within it.

Maria Jiga, age 19,
Degree Apprentice at Rolls-Royce

Ratings of skills equipped with when entering the workplace by young people aged 18-24 (of themselves) and managers (of young people aged 16-24 joining their organisation), to a large extent



(Base: n=1,061 managers except those who are self-employed or have no employees, CMI Poll 2026; n=514 young people, YouGov Poll 2026)

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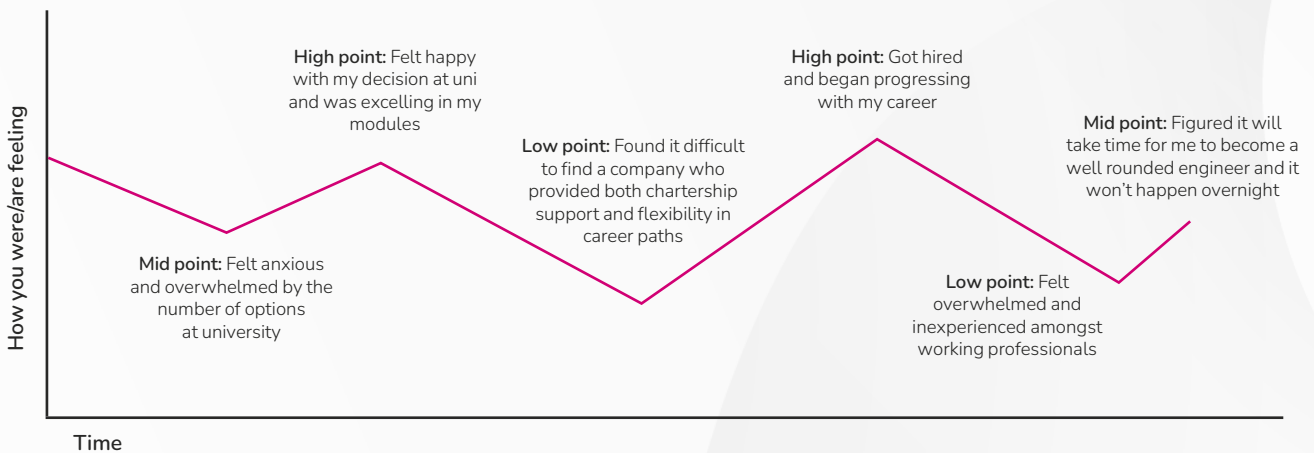
Some people don't even know how to use Outlook or Word anymore. It does seem to have moved quite drastically away because AI is now the shortcut. Simple tasks, like how to put an automatic reply on Outlook, get overlooked. Admittedly, if you don't do it, you don't know it, but it is those little things that are the essential building blocks people need to get.

Blake, age 19,
Business owner

Young workers: The confidence rollercoaster

Our extensive qualitative research reinforces the survey outcomes on several levels and adds rich detail about the lived experiences of young people either on the cusp of their working lives, or in the early days of their careers. It reveals that the transition from education to the workplace is not a straight line, but an emotional rollercoaster defined by a lack of confidence and overwhelming pressure.

A pathway to a future career from a CMI CoLab attendee, who identifies the highs and lows of his early-career journey to date



Ali, age 24, Engineering Graduate at Arcadis

Young people see the structured support they relied on during education abruptly running out upon leaving education. Because academic study rarely translates seamlessly into practical life skills or workplace competence, many young people report feeling lost. A major driver of this demoralisation is the entry-level paradox: they feel trapped by employers who increasingly demand extensive experience and credentials beyond a degree for entry-level positions. Real, hands-on experience is incredibly hard to come by unless a young person already has established networks or “knows someone”. This leaves them feeling forced to “take what you’re given” and actively erodes their confidence before they have even started.

“

I'd never had a 9 to 5 job before. I'd had jobs, but not a proper 9 to 5. To be honest, I didn't know what to expect. I was moving 4 hours away from my home as well. So, it was quite a lot of change. And in the end, I sort of had to wing it when I started. Then only after a month or so did I feel fully settled and like I knew what I was doing. So I guess sometimes you just can't really prepare.

**Kate Measroch, age 22,
Consultant at Arcadis**

Beyond the initial job search difficulties, young people are often left feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of career choices, facing transition anxiety and a drop in self-belief from application rejections. This anxiety often persists into their first role, manifesting as imposter syndrome and a feeling of “winging it” as they navigate professional etiquette and responsibilities without clear guidance.

They may have mastered basic expectations such as email etiquette and office culture, but they quickly face new, complex challenges such as conflict resolution, corporate politics and advanced digital application in a professional context. Our qualitative research shows that this forces young workers to navigate vital workplace nuances largely through trial and error, eroding their career confidence at a critical, formative stage.

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When you want to develop and continue learning, there comes a point where that's in your hands. There's a benefit because you're free to explore, and learning how to do so is a skill in itself but if there is a gap in terms of support, it can be difficult to navigate the change. On a graduate programme, I had every development opportunity thrown my way. But you come off it, and all of a sudden you're a small fish in a very big pond. Without a support structure or a particular qualification [in an organisation], there's only so much you can do without having that backing. Having some sort of support network is extremely beneficial because sourcing those opportunities by yourself can be quite hard.

**Rebekah Patterson, age 24,
Local Government Policy and Insight Officer**

This challenging transition is offset by significant high points, creating a career rollercoaster defined by intense bursts of motivation and validation. These successes often centre on tangible achievements, such as securing a first role or qualification and receiving vital validation, whether through praise from senior colleagues, a promotion or the renewed engagement experienced during structured job rotations.

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Because my university degree required independent study, I never learned how to collaborate or resolve conflicts. It would have been incredibly useful to learn those things during my degree. Trying to learn interpersonal skills on the job while actually doing it for real is much harder than learning the theory beforehand.

**Jenson Kidd-Chadwick, age 24,
National Management Trainee at Stoke-on-Trent City Council**

Together, these findings present a clear opportunity for CMI to intervene. Our qualitative research shows that young people highly value the credibility and longevity offered by professional institutions such as CMI, viewing their accreditation as a powerful way to stand out. CMI's new qualifications fill the current market gaps by providing “scaffolding” that prevents the sudden drop-off in support when moving from education into work. By framing leadership and management as transferable, cross-cutting skills, the programmes reassure young people that they will not be pigeonholed too early. Furthermore, by combining evidence-based learning with mentorship, objective diagnostics and practical challenges, CMI bridges the gap between passive online theory and the real-world, confident execution that employers are demanding.

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I think [courses and certifications] help because they give a stamp or a label to show you've actually done work for the industry. That's different to someone who has just researched the theory – even if they know more than someone who's done a course, a qualification just adds a layer of authenticity.

**Farrah, age 22,
previously at University of Nottingham, currently Sales in FinTech**

03

The Three Pillars of Early-Career Success

To effectively intervene and prevent these challenges from spilling into the workplace, we must equip young people with career confidence before they step through the office door. By analysing the early-career journeys of 40 young people via in-depth interviews and focus groups, we identified three primary focus areas – Identify, Build and Demonstrate – for supporting this transition:

Pillar 1: Identify

Young people must identify their own strengths and develop a clear career direction, mapping their skills to the career landscape. They often feel lost and overwhelmed, not only by the sheer plethora of options available to them, but also because the workplace remains a mystery. At this critical pre-decision stage, they can lack the capability to navigate confusing industry jargon, fail to understand what employers actually want or how to formulate a structured plan. This lack of direction and guidance can lead to a feeling that they must simply “take what they are given”, rather than confidently pursuing a career path that genuinely suits their strengths.

Pillar 2: Build

Once clear on a direction, they need to gain hands-on experience and build practical skills. This is heavily blocked by a lack of opportunity; patchy work experience and hard to find placements and internships limit exposure to the workplace. Highly theoretical education also often lacks the practical, day-to-day interactions needed to understand workplace behaviours. Young people also face the challenge of building professional networks. This is heightened by transition anxiety after the structure of formal study disappears, leading many to feel they are “winging it” in their first months. Consequently, young people need a bridge from education to industry and would benefit from structured, real-world training that replaces the academic “scaffolding” they are accustomed to and allows them to learn professional etiquette.

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I feel like there are two completely different stages of difficulty when you're first starting out. The first is at the start, where you feel this pressure of needing to know what you want to do at such a young age. Some people might grow up from when they're young, even as a kid, knowing exactly what they want to do, and they've set their mind on that. But a lot of people just don't know yet, and figuring that out is the first big hurdle.

**Rajan Dahele,
A-level Student**

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Allison Kirkby, Chief Executive at BT Group, shared with CMI how confidence and proactivity are key to self-development:

Be brave enough to put yourself out of your comfort zone on a regular basis because you only learn and grow by being tested or being curious in new environments. If you become comfortable, you don't grow and develop.

Pillar 3: Demonstrate

Finally, they must translate their skills into employable traits to cut through a highly competitive market. Young people need to demonstrate their value to employers and are acutely aware that they want to avoid feeling generic when facing seemingly impersonal application processes. This anxiety extends into the workplace, where many fear that more experienced colleagues won't listen to them. Consequently, young people need support in establishing a professional identity in order to build their presence in the workplace. Without clear progress signals or practical ways to prove their worth, their effort feels high while their motivation and confidence steadily deplete.



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When I think about [the skills I need to be work-ready], I think about communication, networking and getting to know people. It's not just within your immediate company but within the industry as well, which is so important. The more you expose yourself to people within that industry, not only do your communication skills get better, but you become more visible and other opportunities pop up. It's just something you can't really run or hide away from.

**Simren Johal, age 22,
University Student and Communications
Executive at Nachural**

“

I did not know much about professional networking or how to use platforms such as LinkedIn effectively. Once we were taught how to build a professional presence and make use of these tools, I began to see their value. Networking helps put your name out there and allows you to market yourself professionally, which can lead to a range of opportunities. Many of these opportunities are ones you may not have otherwise come across, so I think that aspect is incredibly valuable and has helped me a lot in my career.

**Caitlin Hanna, age 24,
Software Engineer at Liberty IT**

Case Study



Amelia Topley's journey at AK Fire Protection illustrates the unique pressures facing the next generation of leaders. As a young woman stepping into an Office Manager role, Amelia encountered the reality of unconscious bias early in her career and describes how CMI mentoring shifted her mindset.

"There can often be unconscious bias around age and gender," she explains, "which can lead to your decisions or authority being questioned more than others."

Managing more experienced team members created a significant challenge, but CMI mentoring provided a vital sounding board for conflict management and strategic decision-making. Crucially, the process shifted Amelia's internal mindset, grounding her leadership in a professional framework. "One of the most noticeable impacts has been on my confidence," Amelia shares. "Knowing that I am applying recognised management standards has given me greater assurance in my decision-making and leadership approach. This has encouraged me to put myself forward more within professional settings and take on opportunities that I may previously have hesitated to pursue."

This assurance translated into tangible business outcomes. Amelia successfully implemented new software to streamline enquiries and introduced staff incentives that directly boosted sales performance. Even when her leadership was tested by her team, the guidance she received kept her grounded. "My mentor helped me see that being challenged does not necessarily mean you are wrong," she notes, "and that strong leadership often involves making decisions that may not be immediately supported by everyone."

Amelia's experience demonstrates that mentoring isn't just about "soft skills" – it is a driver of business performance. By bridging the gap between potential and execution, mentoring equips young leaders to hold their ground and advocate for themselves. As Amelia concludes,

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Mentorship plays a crucial role in building confidence, capability and career progression in young women, particularly in environments where they may feel underrepresented.

Amelia Topley
Office Manager at AK Fire Protection

For organisations, Amelia's story proves that investing in mentoring is not only an investment in talent development, but a strategic driver for operational efficiency, team growth and the development of future-ready leadership. Encouragingly, managers recognise this hurdle: 64% agree that work experience or paid internships are among the most effective initiatives for integrating young people into the workforce¹⁷.

CMI's mentoring platform provides a valuable resource of professional managers who offer mentorship from across all sectors, which can be particularly influential for those in an SME environment.

¹⁷ CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

04

The Manager's Role: Enabling Young Talent to Thrive

Because young people are arriving in the workplace with these unmet needs across the **Identify**, **Build** and **Demonstrate** stages, an immense additional onus is placed on managers for training and development. To bridge the gap, managers themselves require robust support. With 82% of managers promoted into the role without any formal management training, employers need to think about the opportunity cost of not upskilling their early-career managers¹⁸.

Trained managers increase retention, build more inclusive and productive teams and gain the skills needed to support new hires through that crucial onboarding time.

Managers are aware of what interventions work best. For example, when evaluating how to effectively support young people who are NEET entering the workforce, 63% of managers cite mentoring or coaching programmes and 52% point to buddy or peer support systems within the workplace¹⁹. However, delivering this level of granular, developmental support requires highly capable managers.



Traditionally, if you go to university, you get your qualification, then you kind of just shove that into the world and you've got to deal with it yourself, trying to find a job in your field. But, once you have got your qualification with CMI, you can get matched with a mentor in the field. They can give you advice or recommendations on where you could go in the future. It's definitely a good thing because it removes some of the stress and worries about finding a job afterwards or finding the next thing to go to.

Rajan Dahele,
A-level Student

This sentiment is strongly echoed by the young people themselves; 86% of young people in paid employment agree that it is important their line manager has received training on how to properly support and guide someone at the start of their career²⁰.

The vast majority (89%) of managers who had received training believe it enabled them to better support and develop new hires and younger employees. They reported being more skilled at

coaching and development planning (62%), facilitating better feedback and performance conversations (53%) and, perhaps crucially given the reported levels of anxiety among young people, confidence in supporting wellbeing and other sensitive issues (51%)²¹.



To set employers up for success when it comes to onboarding younger workers with the skills gaps identified in this research, upskilling managers through CMI's Leadership Academy suite is an essential parallel step. CMI's **First-Line Management Programme** is an accelerated pathway designed to develop junior and aspiring managers into confident leaders. It provides the support that younger workers taking their first steps into managing others need to thrive in their early-career.

The programme focuses on bridging the gap between individual contribution and team supervision through high-impact masterclasses, lets learners study flexibly to avoid losing staff at pinch points and ensures employers are building a reliable leadership pipeline. Covering personal and team effectiveness, managing performance and conflict and a management impact project, the programme delivered via three masterclasses also leads to CMI's Foundation Chartered Manager (fCMgr) status upon completion. This puts learners on a path to becoming Chartered and signals to them that their employer is invested in their future success.

By embedding these essential leadership skills, the programme directly addresses the 'onboarding gap' identified by young recruits, ensuring they receive the consistent guidance, effective feedback and well-being support required to transition smoothly into professional life. Furthermore, it transforms managers into critical advocates for early-career staff; rather than leaving new hires to "wing it", this approach fosters professional confidence and clarifies expectations, serving as a primary driver for the long-term retention of ambitious talent.

Ultimately, this programme provides a systemic solution to the youth employment challenge, helping employers move beyond short-term placements to create an inclusive culture where young talent feels truly supported to grow, thrive and progress.

¹⁸ CMI (2023), [Better Management Report: Taking responsibility - why UK plc needs better managers](#)

¹⁹ CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

²⁰ YouGov (2026), Poll of young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI

²¹ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

Recommendations

CMI's dual approach

To solve the challenge of workplace readiness, intervention must happen on two fronts: upskilling the managers who oversee early-career staff and fundamentally changing how we prepare young people during their education and formative working years.

Our research highlights exactly what the market is asking for: 69% of managers identify “training on basic workplace tools and professional skills” as the single most effective way to support young people entering the workforce. Alongside this, 50% highlight the need for dedicated onboarding or workplace-readiness programmes²².

CMI is uniquely positioned to act as an active partner for young people. Crucially, qualitative findings highlight that the word “management” can feel intimidating, corporate and hierarchy-driven to young people. However, learning “leadership” as a mindset – taking responsibility, communicating well and inspiring others – feels aspirational and attainable.

To directly address this, CMI is launching two new programmes specifically designed to build this vital career confidence:

Leadership Essentials:



Designed for those in apprenticeships or studying at college who are not yet in work. This programme focuses on demystifying the workplace, translating academic theory into practical skills and helping them feel confident and ready before they step into their first role, thereby reducing the future onboarding burden for employers.

Aspiring Leaders:



Designed for those just starting or already in their formative years in the workplace. This programme boosts existing skills, helping them to map out their career trajectory, build resilience and gain the confidence to take on more responsibilities without needing constant managerial intervention.

Both programmes go beyond generic skills training by combining foundational workplace leadership skills (like team collaboration and time management) with deep personal development (such as building professional identity). Alongside the programme delivery, student membership of the CMI provides wraparound support including mentoring, access to professional networks and, through CMI Thrive, access to digital learning resources. Upon completion, learners receive a digital badge – a reputable, tangible “proof” of motivation and practical capability that helps them stand out to employers and arrive on day one ready to contribute.

²² CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

Policy recommendations

To truly bridge the gap between education and the workplace, the solution cannot rest on one group alone. It requires a fundamental shift in policy and a collaborative approach between education providers, employers, professional bodies, policymakers, parents and young people themselves. Building on our research, we recommend the following:

1

Build work readiness to support labour market entry

Practical work-readiness through foundational leadership skills should become a core element of preparation for employment. Young people need explicit development in professional communication, workplace behaviour, resilience and the use of common workplace tools to support their way into the labour market.

This responds directly to employer demand. Nearly seven in ten managers (69%) identify training on basic workplace tools and professional skills as the most effective support for young people entering work²³. Educational institutions and employers should work together to deliver more structured programmes that bridge the gap between education and employment, helping young people develop the confidence and capabilities needed to succeed from day one.

To deliver this, educational institutions and employers can leverage CMI's new Future Leaders programmes. By enrolling pre-career students in Leadership Essentials and early-career employees in Aspiring Leaders, we can provide the credible, practical scaffolding needed to transform anxious students into confident, capable professionals.

2

Equip managers to support NEET and young people's recruitment and retention

Government plans to subsidise the recruitment of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) must be matched by investment in the managers responsible for supporting them once they enter the workplace. Many young people entering work have limited employment experience and may face complex health, mental health or socio-economic challenges. Employers, particularly SMEs, need managers who are equipped to provide effective onboarding, coaching and development.

As part of its response to the Milburn Review, the government should extend Growth and Skills Levy funding through new Apprenticeship Units focused on those line managers responsible for supporting the successful integration of young people into work. This would address a significant gap in current policy, which concentrates support on young recruits while overlooking the capability of those responsible for managing them.

The case for action is clear. In addition to the compelling new data in this report, previous CMI research shows that 82% of managers are 'accidental managers' who enter management roles without formal training²⁴, while 89% of trained managers report that management development has improved their ability to support younger employees²⁵. Strengthening management capability will help improve retention, create clearer career pathways and ensure that NEET recruitment initiatives deliver long-term outcomes rather than short-term placements.

²³ CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

²⁴ CMI (2023), [Better Management Report: Taking responsibility - why UK plc needs better managers](#)

²⁵ CMI (2026), January 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

3

Expand work experience and mentoring opportunities

Young people need greater exposure to the workplace before securing permanent employment. Employers should be encouraged and supported to provide more placements, internships and paid work experience opportunities through a coordinated national approach that reduces the administrative burden.

Research shows that 64% of managers view paid work experience and internships as among the most effective ways of integrating young people into the workforce. These opportunities should be complemented by structured mentoring and peer-support networks. Mentorship is identified by 63% of managers as a highly effective intervention²⁶. CMI calls on its members as professional managers to do more to provide the mentoring and work experience opportunities that can help young people access networks, understand workplace expectations and navigate career transitions.

4

Create an earlier and more collaborative talent pipeline

Currently, there is a disjointed 'blame game' regarding youth employability. When asked who holds the greatest responsibility for preparing young people for work, 74% of managers point to educational institutions and 73% point to the young people themselves, while only 35% believe employers hold this responsibility²⁷.

We must break down these silos. While some localised programmes are making inroads in bringing stakeholders together in a coordinated approach, solving this crisis requires a deeply collaborative ecosystem where schools, colleges, training providers, professional bodies, businesses and parents work together. Furthermore, career intervention must start much earlier – even as early as primary school – to build long-term momentum, rather than waiting until the daunting transition period at age 18.

CMI is working with the Careers & Enterprise Company, Edge Foundation, the Leadership Skills Foundation, Commercial Education Trust and other youth employment groups to develop collective insights and recommendations. These will inform the final Milburn Review focusing not just on how young people can get a job, but how they can succeed, stay and progress in work.



²⁶ CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

²⁷ CMI (2026), May 2026 Managers' Voice Poll

Appendix 1: References

The following reports, organisations and data sources are cited in this report, with qualitative research including:

- 4 Youth CoLab focus groups (of 20 young people aged 18-25 recruited via CMI channels), conducted in March and April 2026
- 20 external in-depth interviews (of young people aged 18-24 sampled to represent those in education or on their early-career path) conducted in March and April 2026
- CoLab focus groups of professionals working in youth skills and employment from UK employers and further education colleges, conducted in December 2025 to May 2026
- CMI Managers' Voice Poll of 916 UK working managers conducted between 16th July and 4th August 2025
- CMI Managers' Voice Poll of 1,139 UK working managers conducted between 14th January and 27th January 2026
- CMI Managers' Voice Poll of 1,111 UK working managers conducted between 18th and 27th May 2026
- YouGov (2026), Poll of 514 young people aged 18-24 commissioned by CMI conducted between 27th May and 3rd June 2026
- Department for Work & Pensions (2026), [Young people and work: interim report](#)
- CMI (2024), UK Dual Accreditation student survey
- ManpowerGroup (2025), [2025 UK Talent Shortage](#)
- CMI (2023), [Better Management Report: Taking responsibility - why UK plc needs better managers](#)

Appendix 2: Acknowledgements

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