



Advisory

A new workforce reality

Closing the gap between
transformation ambition and
workforce execution

OCTOBER 2026



THE ADECCO GROUP

Executive Summary

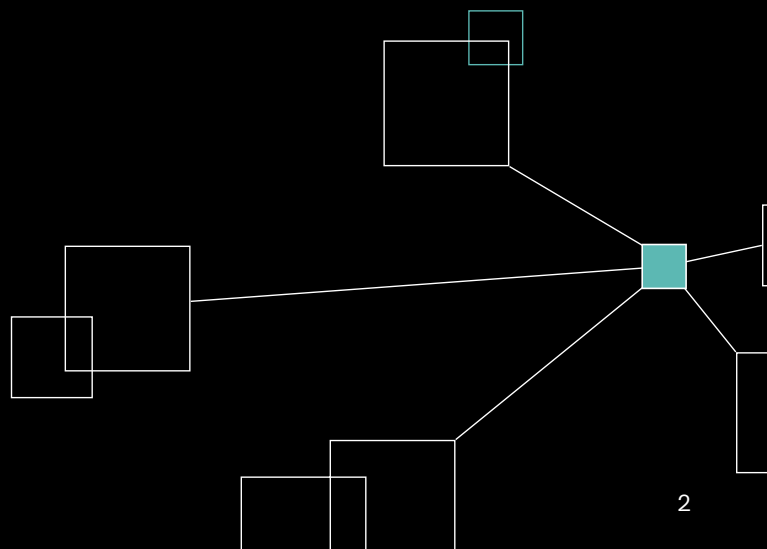
Turning organizational strategy into workforce action

Most organizations know where they want to go.
Far fewer know whether their workforce can get them there.

Leaders are increasing technology investment and raising expectations while employees navigate new initiatives, competing priorities, and changing ways of working.

Continuous change makes that tension harder to manage. When leadership ambition moves faster than employees can absorb and execute it, a “Say/Do gap” opens between strategic intent and day-to-day delivery. Closing that gap requires leaders to understand both workforce capacity and the capabilities their strategy demands.

To discover how organizations are responding, we conducted a global study of 17,750 workers and business leaders across ten markets¹. The research examines perceptions of change, confidence in leadership and how organizations build and deploy skills. It provides a practical starting point for connecting business strategy with workforce decisions.



Executive Summary

Our report highlights four realities shaping leadership agendas

01 The permanent state of volatility
Uncertainty has become an operating condition, making decision speed, adaptability, and resilience even more important.

Chapter one explores how leaders can better adapt while giving employees the capacity and clarity to deliver changing priorities.



02 The Say/Do transformation gap
The distance between leadership intent and workforce experience is widening, exacerbated by evolving employee expectations.

Chapter two looks at how priorities, workloads, and support affect the delivery of change.



03 Skills-led organizations
Forward-thinking organizations are using skills intelligence to better understand which capabilities they have, which they need, and how to develop or deploy them as work changes.

Chapter three reveals how organizations can implement a skills-first approach with a practical framework.

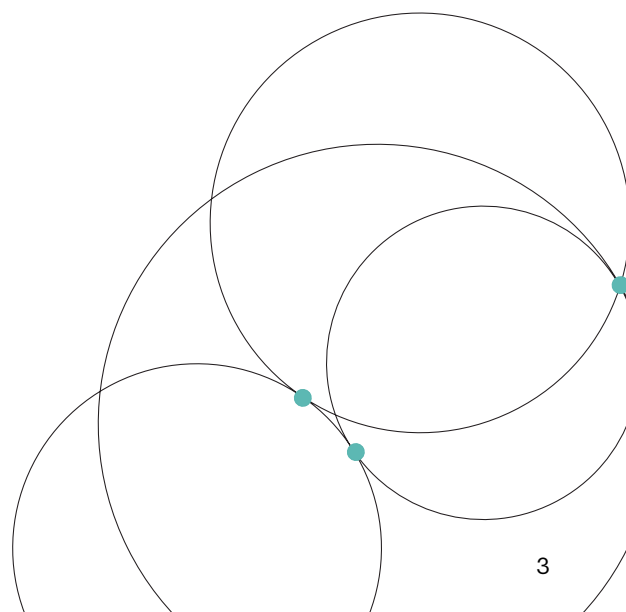


04 The leadership action framework
Chapter four concludes by sharing an action framework that will help leaders design for continuous change, close the Say/Do gap, and make skills intelligence actionable.

Together, these insights show how leaders can build the capacity and capability to convert transformation ambition into sustained execution.



Darren Philpott CPsychol
Global Vice President | Workforce Strategy & Innovation



Chapter One

The permanent state of volatility

Stability is no longer a guarantee for any business. Organizations and their people operate in a state of flux every day, whether it's influenced by forces like AI deployment, macroeconomic shifts, supply chain disruptions or workforce demographics.

This volatility is experienced differently across the organization.

At the employee level

Individuals feel the weight of each change all at once. They experience altered roles, changing systems, competing deadlines, unclear decisions and repeated requests to learn new skills, while also confronting fear and uncertainty about how AI may affect their jobs, all while continuing to deliver.

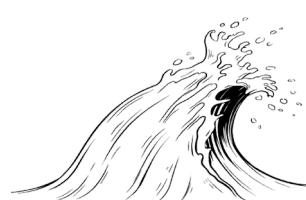
At the leadership level

Leaders often manage from a “portfolio” perspective based on their view of the business and the strategy they are working toward; like a restructure, an acquisition, an AI investment, or a new operating model.

Across the enterprise

Across the enterprise, change initiatives collide. Leaders must make explicit trade-offs between new priorities and the demands of day-to-day performance.

Historic change Single wave



Current change Turbulent multiwave sea

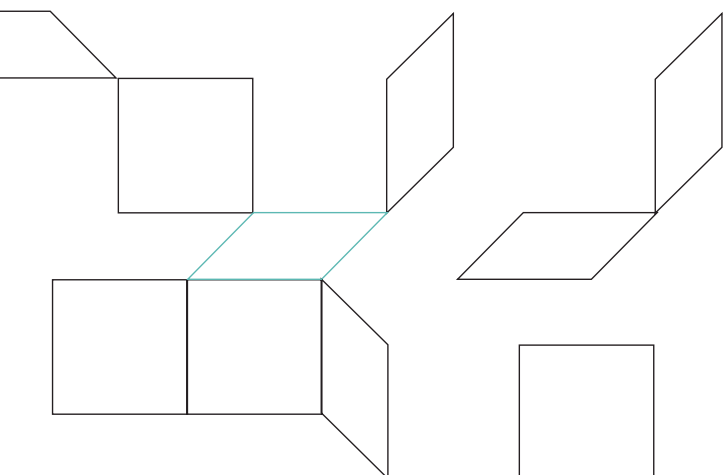


Organizations have gone from relative stability to continuous volatility.

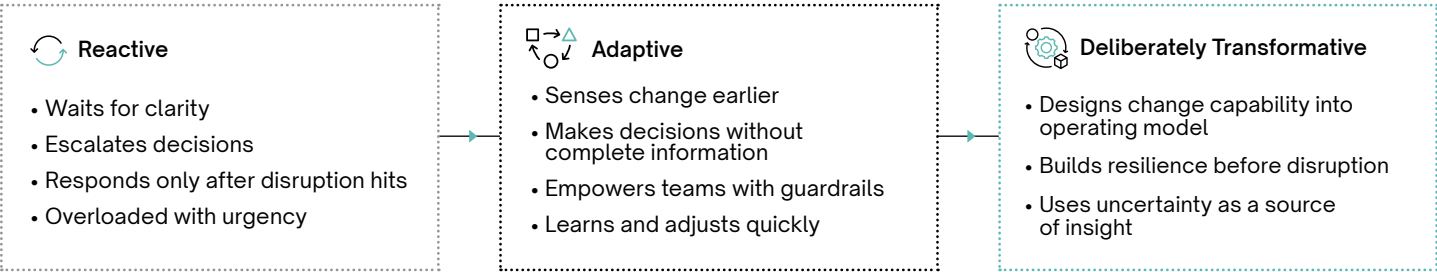
Adapting to volatility

Treating uncertainty as an exception keeps organizations reactive and can lead to employee disruption. However, companies that are deliberately transformative by anticipating change and responding proactively can redirect resources sooner, make decisions faster, and maintain performance. They can also identify emerging skill needs and move or develop talent accordingly.

Anticipating change helps leaders identify emerging demands, assess the capacity available, and decide where to develop or deploy skills.



Three stages of maturity



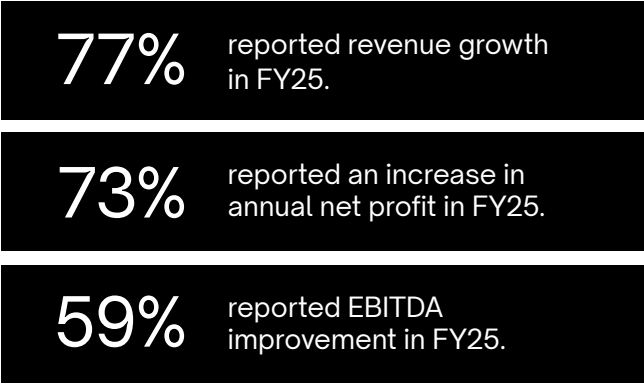
Organizational responses to volatility

Change is now a condition of competitiveness. Organizations must continually adapt their strategies, operating models, and workforce to capture growth.

Our research reflects this relationship: **82%** of organizations experiencing higher levels of change reported increased revenue, compared with **77%** overall.

Change alone does not create an advantage. The differentiator is how deliberately an organization anticipates volatility, makes decisions, and aligns workforce capacity and capability with shifting priorities.

Organizations with a more mature approach to managing volatility report stronger financial outcomes. Among deliberately transformative organizations:



Operating with resilience

To operate effectively through volatility and turn it into an advantage, leaders need to focus on three interconnected factors: decision speed, managing change load, and adapting to continuous technology acceleration.

02 Change load

Organizations build resilience by managing their change load. We define this as the total volume, velocity, complexity, and emotional cost of changes an organization is handling at once.

TOTAL CHANGE LOAD =			
+ VOLUME	+ VELOCITY	+ COMPLEXITY	+ EMOTIONAL COST
How many changes are happening at once?	How fast are changes landing?	How much new behavior, process, tech or decision-making is required?	How much uncertainty, identity shift, fatigue or trust impact is created?

Unmanaged change load can overwhelm and stall progress. Effective leaders, and organizations, must assess capacity first, reprioritizing work rather than adding more to ensure operational efficiency.

01 Decision speed

66%

of leaders say they face a continuously evolving daily operating environment.

53%

are prioritizing decision speed over evaluating every variable.

In volatile environments, waiting for complete information can delay action. By setting clear decision rights and risk guardrails, enterprises can empower teams to move quickly and autonomously with the information available.

03 Technology acceleration

67%

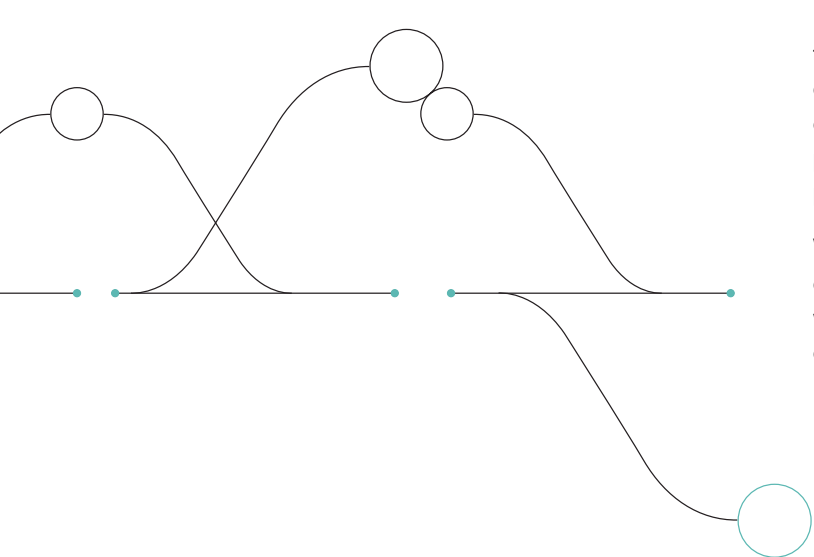
of employees have recently experienced a major technology implementation.

47%

Almost half experienced their most recent implementation within the past year.

Major technology implementations add to the changes teams must absorb. Leaders need to understand how each implementation affects and potentially changes existing work and support employees in transitioning processes and ways of operating to maximize the potential technology efficiencies.

When the pace of leadership ambition exceeds employees' capacity to absorb and execute change, the Say/Do gap widens. The next chapter examines how that gap impacts employees' confidence and day-to-day experience.



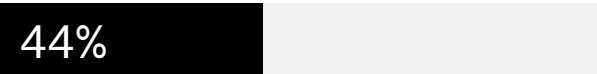
Chapter Two

The Say/Do transformation gap

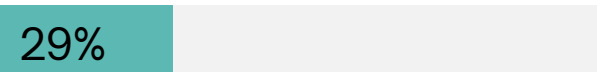
As organizations transform and navigate volatility, they face a significant leadership challenge: an expanding gap between what leaders say and what their people actually experience.

The confidence divide

Our research shows that:
Less than half of leaders express strong confidence in executive leadership to lead the company’s transformation in the face of new technologies like AI.



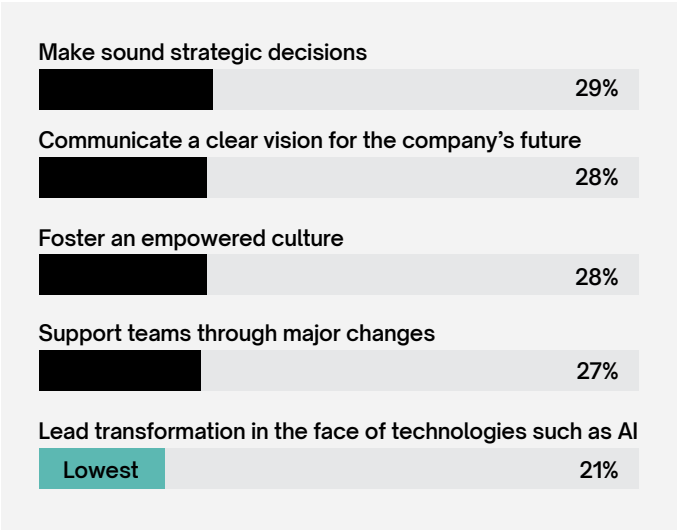
Workers’ confidence in leadership is even weaker: Less than a third of workers express strong confidence in the ability of their leadership team to make strategic decisions that will lead to future success.



Employee confidence in senior leadership’s capability

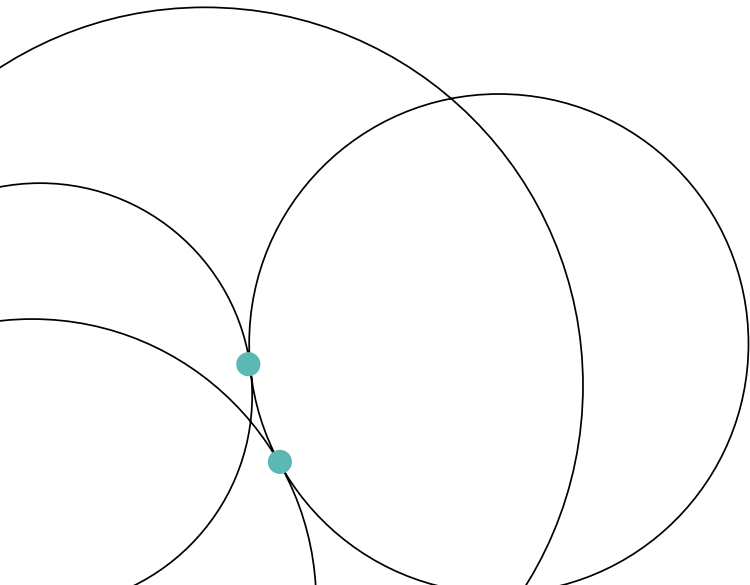
Worker confidence in senior leadership has declined in recent years. Fewer than one-third express strong confidence in several of the leadership capabilities required to navigate transformation.

This suggests the issue extends beyond communication: employees are questioning whether leaders can translate ambition into clear priorities, practical support, and a credible path through change.



Confidence is thinnest where the stakes are highest: **only 21%** trust leadership to steer the company through AI.

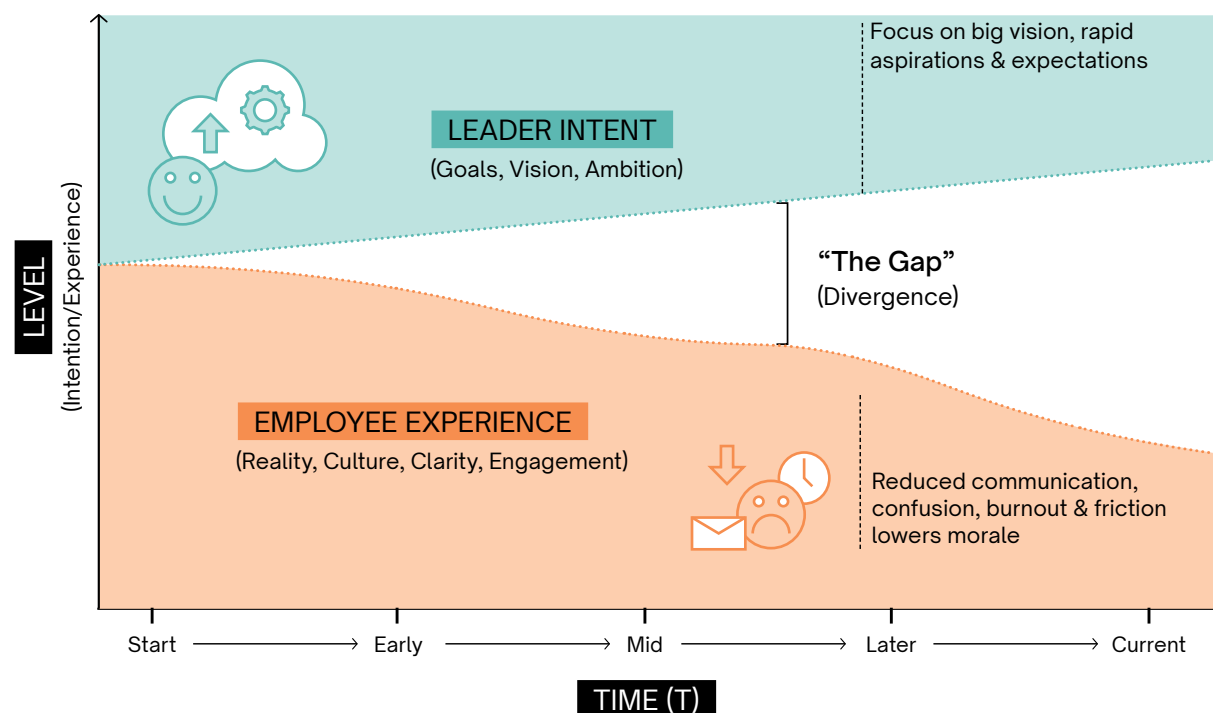
This confidence gap has direct consequences for workforce execution. When employees don’t see clear priorities, practical support or a credible path through change, friction rises and delivery slows. Closing the Say/Do gap therefore requires leaders to test strategic intent against workforce experience and respond to what the evidence reveals.



Where transformation ambition breaks down

Divergence between leader intent & employee experience

Visualizing the increasing gap over time

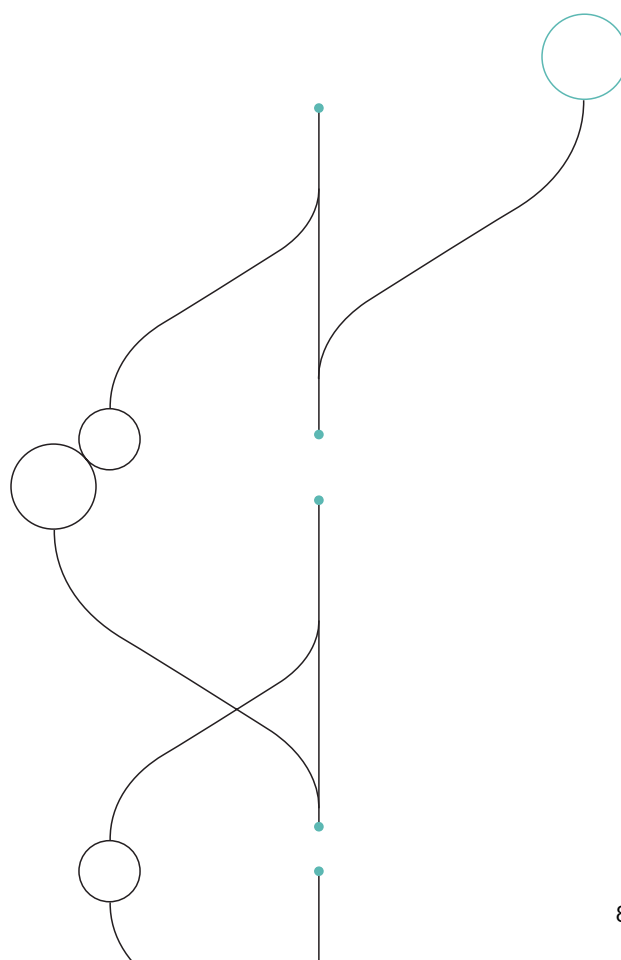


Misalignment often occurs because leaders experience transformation as strategic progress while employees experience its operational friction.

Executives often quickly advance to the vision and commitment phase, while employees are left navigating the operational disruption and system friction of early adoption.

Trust can then break down when leadership launches new initiatives without recognizing the operational burdens it creates for the workforce. This also creates capability gaps where employees don't possess the required skills to implement a change and are not given sufficient time, clarity, and support.

This weakened confidence and operational confusion prevents organizations from acting with the resilience, speed, and clarity needed to withstand volatility.



Rebuilding trust with data

34%

of C-suite leaders identify improving employee trust, engagement and organizational transparency as a top people-strategy priority for the next 12 months².

Closing the Say/Do gap requires evidence of where transformation is creating friction, exceeding workforce capacity or exposing capability risks. This depends on data in areas such as employee sentiment, change readiness, and anticipated operational impacts.

Leaders can use this evidence to anticipate workforce capability needs and better align talent to emerging priorities. Being able to identify, build, and deploy the skills the transformation requires will help organizations turn strategy into action and rebuild trust from within.

Chapter three examines how skills intelligence provides that evidence and helps organizations mobilize capability against changing priorities.



² The Adecco Group's 2026 business leaders' report with 2,000 C-suite leaders across 13 markets, which explores trust as a key theme

Chapter Three

Skills-led organizations

While AI and technology play a critical role in facilitating an organization's talent strategies, they aren't the only factors that define sustainable success. For an organization to effectively drive transformation, adapt to volatility and meet employee expectations, it needs to have a skills-led approach embedded into its strategic core.

Skills drive organizational capability

A skills-led organization connects business priorities with the capabilities needed to deliver them.

Leaders can use skills intelligence to understand workforce strengths, anticipate changing requirements and decide where to develop, recruit or redeploy talent.

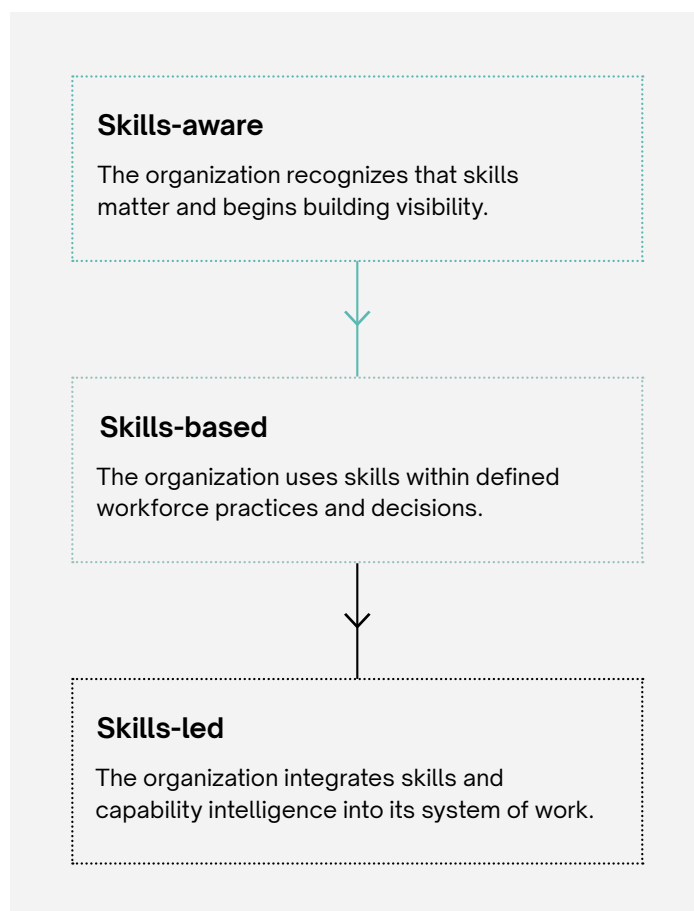
This approach makes skills information useful in everyday workforce decisions, from planning critical development to matching people with work that needs their expertise.

Only
41% of business leaders use skills data to guide real workforce decisions³.

And just
38% have a clear, data-backed view of current and future skill needs.

The skills maturity model

This simple maturity model shows how consistently skills information informs workforce decisions in any given organization. Progress depends on how the information is applied as well as the visibility available.



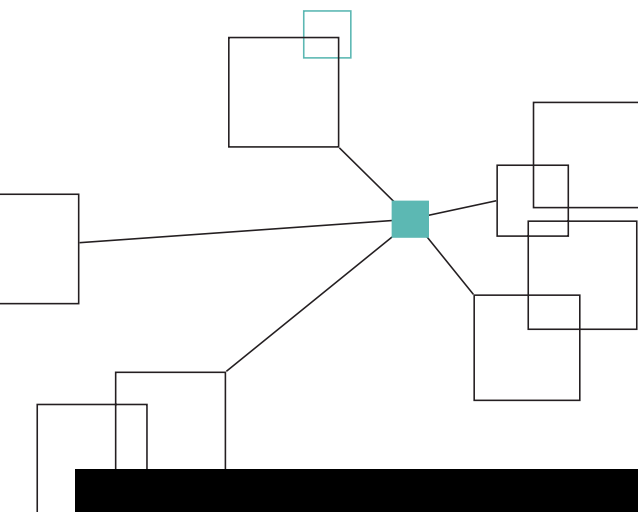
Most organizations are skills-aware at best, with skills data rarely used to guide hiring, development, or talent deployment.

³ The Adecco Group's 2026 business leaders' report with 2,000 C-suite leaders across 13 markets, which explores trust as a key theme

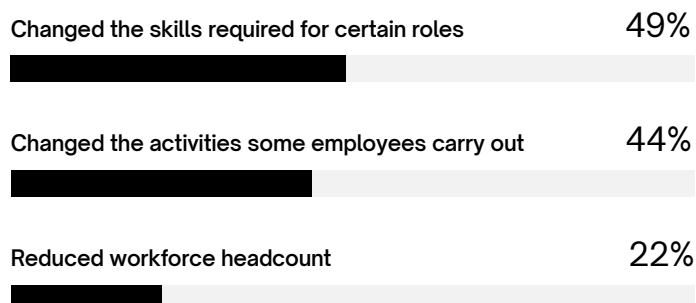
Redesigning work and workflows

AI is already changing work.

If AI is changing skills and activities more often than reducing headcount, our primary question should shift from “Which jobs will AI replace?” to “How will work be redesigned and how will we redeploy people?”



% of leaders who say AI has...



Combining technical and human capabilities

Technologies such as generative AI and automation change workflows, processes, and tasks. Organizations therefore need to understand how the work is changing before deciding which technical capabilities they require. They can then determine whether to build those capabilities internally or access them through talent acquisition and other workforce interventions.

Technical expertise is only part of that requirement. Employees also draw upon problem-solving, communication, adaptability, and judgment to interpret outputs, manage exceptions, and apply technology within the context of their work. Our research indicates a difference in emphasis between the technical capabilities leaders prioritized when hiring and the human capabilities employees report using in their daily work.

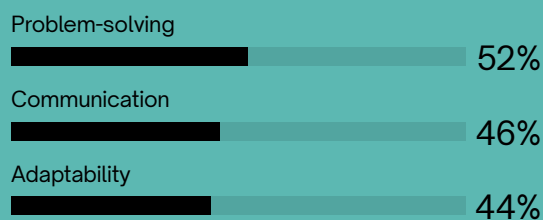
What leaders hire for

75% prioritize technical capabilities



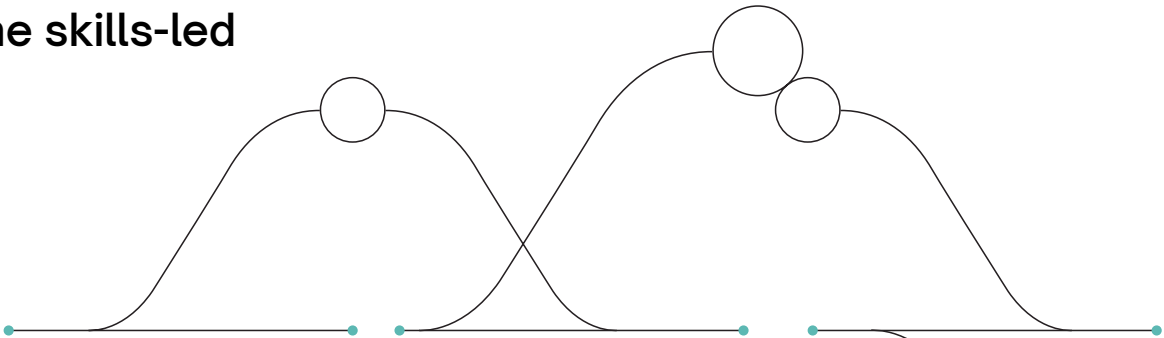
What employees use

Employees rely on core human capabilities to navigate daily work.



Skills intelligence can help organizations determine how technical and human capabilities should be combined and deployed as AI reshapes tasks and workflows.

How to become skills-led



01

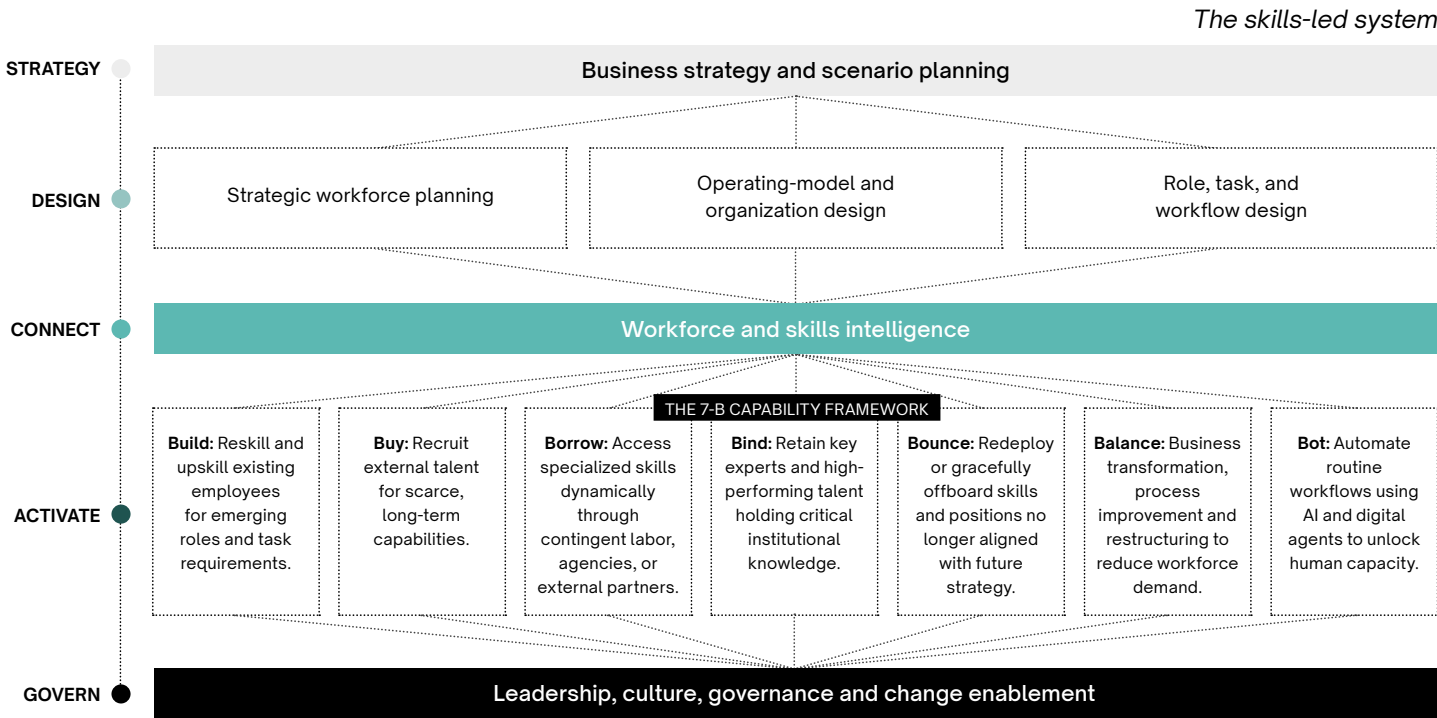
Build a skills-led system

As highlighted in the [Adecco Group’s Rise of Hybrid Labor Markets whitepaper](#), competitive advantage will increasingly depend on how effectively organizations redesign work and orchestrate human capability, AI agents and automation. Skills intelligence helps leaders understand changing capability requirements and determine how people and technology should be deployed across evolving workflows.

A skills-based organization operates through five connected stages. **STRATEGY** sets the business direction. **DESIGN** translates that direction into work and capability requirements. **CONNECT** uses skills intelligence to reveal the gap between current supply and future demand.

ACTIVATE closes those gaps through workforce actions such as development, mobility, hiring, or automation. **GOVERN** provides the ownership, decision rights, and measures needed to keep the system aligned as priorities change.

Together, these stages move the organization beyond headcount planning toward a workforce that can adapt as business needs and technology evolve. Once organizations can see where capabilities exist and where they are needed, internal mobility becomes an important means of closing gaps: people can move toward emerging work, rather than capability remaining fixed within existing roles, teams, or functions.



02

Bridge the mobility gap

When employees cannot see a viable path for growth, they either look to move internally or look for outside opportunities. To retain and deploy capability effectively, leaders must align workforce strategy with how talent moves today.

The reality of modern talent movement.

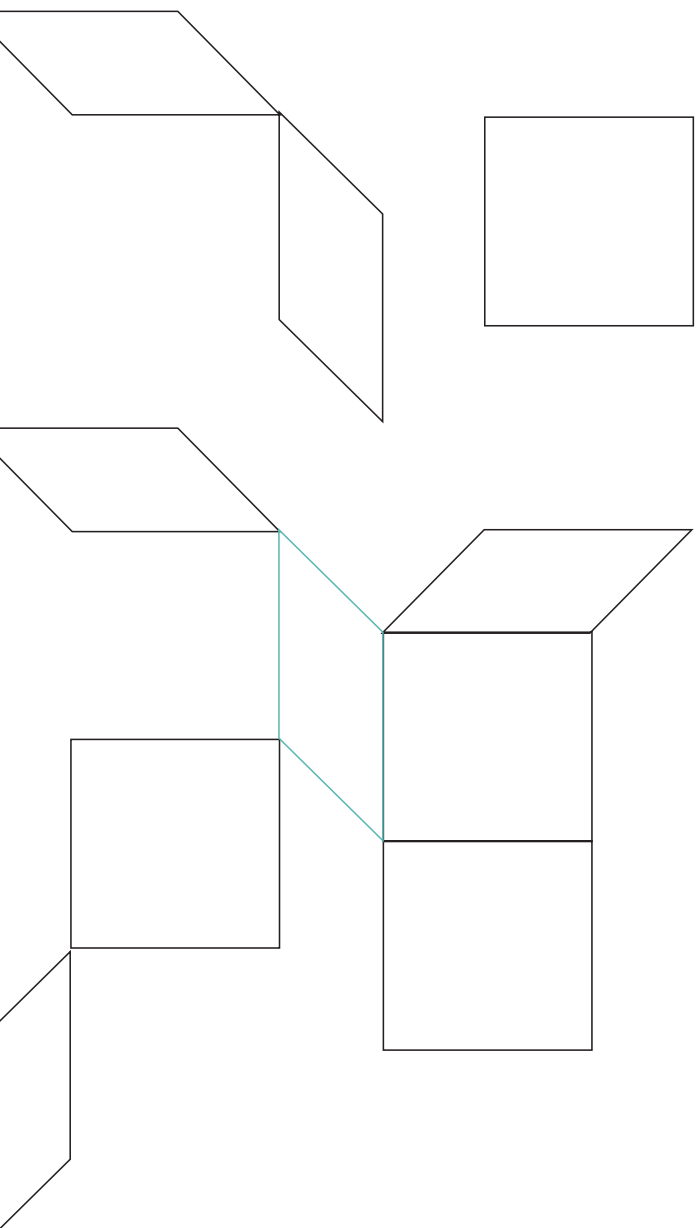
34% of employees have moved into entirely different industry sectors over the course of their career.

25% have tried to reskill or moved into completely different job families.

Without the visibility and mechanisms to support this movement internally, enterprises risk losing critical capability to competitors every time market volatility spikes. Leaders cannot mandate agility alone; employees need sufficient agency to shape their development, while managers need the incentives and authority to release people into different roles, teams, and functions.

Visibility alone is not enough. Enterprises need governance, managerial willingness, and structural incentives to move talent and funding across functional boundaries.

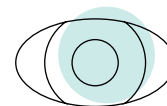




A skills-led organization should therefore be judged by its ability to translate strategy into work, work into capability, and capability into sustained execution. Leaders can test whether that system is working by asking five connected questions:

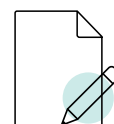
01 | See:

What skills do we possess today?



02 | Anticipate:

What work will the strategy require under future scenarios?



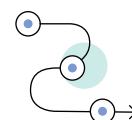
03 | Decide:

Where are the critical gaps and how do you close them?



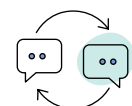
04 | Act:

Can we deploy, reskill, or gain capabilities rapidly?



05 | Learn:

Are interventions improving performance metrics?



Skills intelligence creates value when leaders use it to make decisions about capacity, development, and deployment. In Chapter four, we set out four leadership imperatives that turn this insight into action.

Chapter Four

The leadership action framework

Transformation breaks down when ambition outpaces the organization’s capacity to execute. Leaders need the same discipline in understanding workforce capacity and capability that they apply to other critical business resources.

They must also stay close to the employee experience, because uncertainty, friction, and change fatigue are early indicators of execution risk.

The action framework below translates the report’s findings into four leadership imperatives. Together, they help executive teams create capacity for change, close the gap between intent and experience, mobilize capability around priorities, and redesign work as technology evolves.

Leadership action framework

01 Create capacity for change

Leadership action	Leadership behavior	Test
Map the total change load, then stop, sequence, or resource work that exceeds the organization’s capacity.	Make trade-offs visible. Don’t ask employees to absorb conflicting priorities while leadership avoids difficult choices.	What will we stop to make room for this priority?

02 Close the Say/Do gap

Leadership action	Leadership behavior	Test
Test strategic intent against the experience of people delivering the work, then remove the friction causing delivery issues.	Listen without defending the plan. Translate ambition into clear priorities, practical support, and credible commitments.	What are employees experiencing that leadership may not see?

03 Mobilize capability around the work

Leadership action

Use skills intelligence to decide whether critical capability should be developed, redeployed, recruited, or accessed externally.

Leadership behavior

Reward talent movement across boundaries rather than allowing managers to protect headcount.

Test

Do we know which capabilities are critical, where they exist, and how quickly they can be mobilized?

04 Redesign work for a hybrid workforce

Leadership action

Deconstruct priority workflows to determine which tasks require human judgment, which can be automated, and how people and technology should work together.

Leadership behavior

Treat AI adoption as a work-design decision, rather than layering technology onto existing processes.

Test

Have we redesigned the work, or simply added technology to the existing process?



Executive teams should examine all four leadership imperatives together, because weakness in one can undermine progress in the others.

Apply the framework to a critical business priority, identify the most material execution risks across the four imperatives, and agree where action is required first.

Assign an accountable leader, define the workforce and business outcomes that should change, and review progress with the people closest to the work. Leadership credibility and trust grow when insight results in visible choices, measurable progress, and sustained action.

Conclusion

From workforce insight to execution

Strategy only becomes executable when leaders create room for change and stay close to how work is experienced. They must then direct capability to the priorities that matter and redesign work as technology evolves. Organizations that manage these disciplines together will be better equipped to sustain performance through volatility and deliver on their transformation ambition.

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Aligning your business and workforce strategy.

The Adecco Group is the world's leading talent and technology partner, committed to making the future work for everyone. Operating across 60 countries through our three global business units: Adecco, Akkodis, and LHH, we build sustainable employability, engineer digital transformation, and optimize workforce performance.

Our Advisory practice partners with executive leaders to solve complex business challenges by aligning workforce, organization, transformation, and leadership strategies with the future needs of the business.

1Research methodology

This report draws on research commissioned by The Adecco Group and conducted by Opinium. A quantitative survey of 17,750 white-collar workers and organizational leaders across ten global markets. The research explored how organizations and employees are responding to accelerating technological, workforce, and business change. Using proprietary Worker and Employer Agility Indices, the study measured dimensions such as learning orientation, career adaptability, workforce empowerment, technology adoption, leadership effectiveness, and proactive change behaviors.

Findings provide insight into the organizational and workforce practices most closely associated with business performance, employee resilience, AI readiness, career growth, and adaptability in today's rapidly evolving world of work.

