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ISE EARLY TALENT INTELLIGENCE SUMMIT 2026

CIBYL INSIGHT · THE BUSINESS CASE FOR EARLY CAREERS

Why are we still paying for early careers?

What the evidence says



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Sarah Roché is Advisory Practice Lead at Cibyl, the research and insight arm of GTI. She draws on her session at the ISE Early Talent Intelligence Summit 2026 to set out the business case for early careers investment in the age of AI, and the evidence behind it.

Budgets are tight. AI is reshaping entry level work. So it's no surprise that most Heads of Early Careers are being asked some version of the same question right now: why are we still paying for this?

The good news? You aren't defending a cost line. You're making a workforce planning argument, and the evidence is on your side.

SPONSOR'S NOTE

GTI is proud to sponsor this Talent Intelligence Member Spotlight. At the ISE Early Talent Intelligence Summit, we asked a hard question: why are we still paying for early careers? This article shares what the evidence says, plus a framework for making the case to your leadership team.

01

Cooling, not collapsing

The headlines focus on the fall: graduate vacancies dropped 8% in 2025, while applications hit a record 140 per vacancy. But that was the trough, not the trend. ISE's Student Recruitment Report 2026 found graduate hiring rose 4% this year, recovering that lost ground, with employers forecasting a further 7% growth for 2026/27.

−8%	140	+4%	+7%
fall in graduate vacancies in 2025	applications per vacancy, a record high	rise in graduate hiring this year	further growth forecast for 2026/27

Source: ISE Student Recruitment Report 2026.

Employer intentions point the same way. In *Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next*, a survey of more than 500 HR, talent and early careers professionals by CRF and BPP, more than half expect their early careers hiring to grow.

Expected change in early careers hiring over the next two to three years

% of HR, talent and early careers professionals



Source: CRF and BPP, Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next (500+ respondents).

Graduate hiring is only part of the picture. Rising apprenticeship opportunities can help offset a softer graduate market, so both routes matter when assessing early careers demand. At GTI, we believe our network of 20,000 employers gives us the most accurate picture of early careers job volumes across graduate and apprenticeship opportunities. The real question is what earns the budget back.

02

The ambition is there. The proof often isn't.

Employers know why they invest. In the same research, most point to pipeline and planning. Yet very few can say the investment has paid off. That distance between ambition and evidenced outcome is exactly why budgets wobble.

THE AMBITION

70%

say the main objective of early careers hiring is building a sustainable pipeline of future talent

51%

say workforce and talent planning is now a major or critical driver of change in their strategy

THE PROOF

14%

say their early careers investment has exceeded expectations

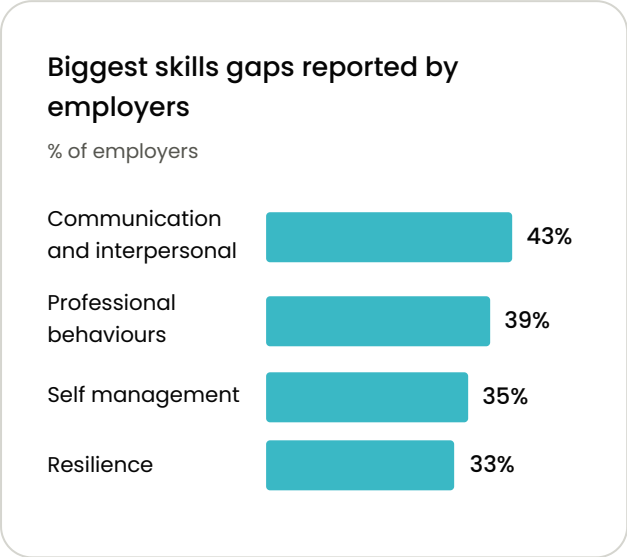
15%

say early career entrants arrive very well prepared for their role

Source: CRF and BPP.

03

The gap is experience, not skills



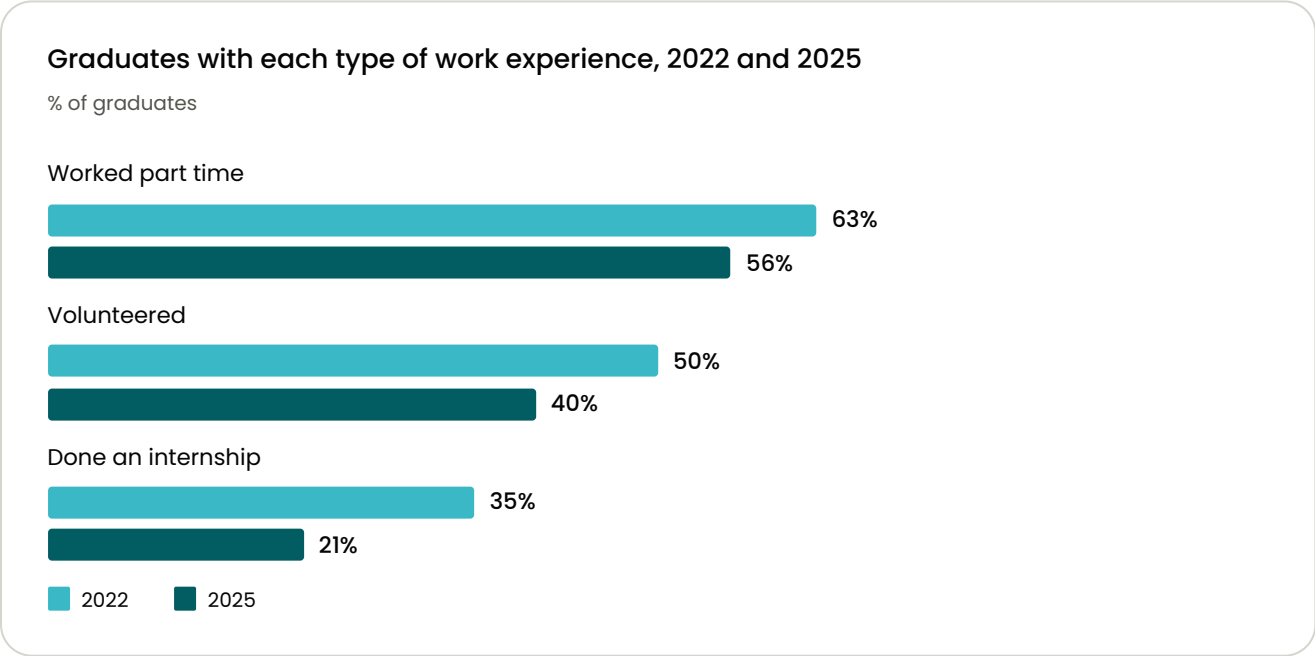
Source: CRF and BPP.

Students see things differently. In our Cibyl Graduate Research, **67.6% of students agree their course gives them the skills the labour market needs**, up 4.5 percentage points since 2019.

Independent measurement backs the students. SHL's Global Skills Assessment, covering 177,430 participants, shows UK graduates outperforming the global cohort, with most measured skills holding or rebuilding between 2021 and 2025.

The one genuine decline is critical thinking, down from 42% to 35% in the top scoring band: worth watching, but not a capability collapse.

So where does the readiness gap come from? Not from capability, but from the chance to build it, and prove it, in a real workplace. Our Cibyl data shows those routes are narrowing.



Source: Cibyl Graduate Research.

26% of young people had accessed work experience in the previous 12 months (2025 Youth Voice Census, cited by CRF and BPP)

WHAT IT MEANS

If experience isn't happening before people join, programmes need to build it on purpose.

04

AI changes the job, not the need

AI is clearly reshaping entry level roles. According to CRF and BPP:

74%

of employers say AI is changing the skills entry level roles need

64%

are redesigning early careers roles in response

63%

say AI is reducing the routine, lower risk work early career hires traditionally learned on

Source: CRF and BPP.

That last point matters most. First drafts, first pass analysis and process admin were the bottom rungs of the learning ladder. AI is taking them away.

What AI can't replace is judgement, adaptability, collaboration and problem solving. And nobody arrives senior. If the tasks juniors learned on are disappearing, development has to be designed deliberately. That means more intentional early careers investment, not less.

05

Who will be left to hire?

Demographics add urgency.

2030

England's 18 year old population is projected to peak, then fall by 7% by 2035 and a further 12% by 2040 (HEPI)

+1.7m

people at state pension age in the UK, from 12.0 million to 13.7 million, between mid 2022 and mid 2032 (ONS)

Put simply, the buy option gets scarcer and more expensive just as you're likely to need it most.

THE JUDGEMENT GAP

The experienced talent you plan to buy in 2032 is the junior talent nobody is hiring today.

Cutting junior hiring can look sensible for one organisation in one budget year. Across a whole sector, over a decade, it hollows out the pipeline.

06

Four parts of a stronger business case

So how do you make the case internally, whether for graduates, apprentices or both? We suggest four building blocks.

01

The honest cost of build

Price everything in from the start, including line manager time. (Around one in four employers in the CRF and BPP survey cite limited line manager capacity as a major or critical barrier.)

02

The forward price to buy

Today's cost of an experienced hire is the wrong number to plan with. Model what that hire will cost after 2030.

03

The risk of a hollow pipeline

Capability gaps and thin succession show up years after the junior cuts that caused them.

04

Proof beyond retention

Retention is the most common measure, but finance will want more. CRF recommends also tracking cost effectiveness, performance, time to competence, critical capabilities and widening access.

54%

of employers track retention, the most common measure

12%

of employers measure nothing at all

Source: CRF and BPP.

Then tailor it to your audience

FOR YOUR CFO

CFOs tend to move on cost of vacancy and the forward buy price.

FOR YOUR CPO

CPOs tend to move on succession depth and capability risk.

IN CLOSING

Data turns a cost line into a plan

Early careers isn't disappearing. But investment in graduates and apprentices does need a sharper case behind it, and that case is built on data: who you're hiring, what they bring, where the gaps are and what it would cost to buy that capability later.

Want to see what the data says for your organisation? Get in touch with the GTI team.

The experienced talent you plan to buy in 2032 is the junior talent nobody is hiring today.



SOURCES

Institute of Student Employers, Student Recruitment Report 2026
CRF and BPP, Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next
Cibyl, Graduate Research
SHL, Global Skills Assessment (177,430 participants)
2025 Youth Voice Census, cited by CRF and BPP
HEPI, 18 year old population projections
ONS, state pension age population projections