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WHITE PAPER

Beyond the first 90 days

Onboarding for Skills Mastery not Skills Masking



Executive Summary

This white paper explores the current state of employee onboarding, drawing on recent survey data from employees in the UK and US and real-world case studies from companies such as **Circle K**, **EQ**, and the **YMCA**.

It highlights key challenges such as confidence gaps, skills masking, skill-gap anxiety, and inconsistent data measurement practices.

The findings show that data analysis is critical to empowering leadership and L&D teams, enabling them to demonstrate the long-term impact and ROI of onboarding training. L&D teams must be able to prove their value as a revenue driver within the business.

The findings emphasize the need for immersive onboarding programs that go beyond simple compliance checklists to build genuine engagement, psychological safety (creating a safe space to learn), and skills mastery for long-term performance.

The research also reveals the costly impact of poor onboarding, which can lead to poor performance, errors, high staff turnover, and a lack of job satisfaction.

Recommendations are provided for designing impactful onboarding experiences that meet KPIs, facilitate authentic behavior change, and have a measurable and demonstrable ROI.

Introduction: Why Onboarding Matters

Onboarding is a critical phase in the employee lifecycle. While there's a general consensus that the first 90 days are vital, many organizations struggle to deliver experiences that truly prepare new hires for success.

Despite significant investments, onboarding often fails to build confidence and competence, address skill gaps, or foster genuine engagement.

This paper explores insights from a comprehensive survey of 2,000 employee respondents in the UK and US and showcases how organizations like the **YMCA**, **EQ**, and **Circle K** are leveraging innovative, gamified training solutions to transform their onboarding strategies.

This approach reduces the time it takes for new hires to become competent, addresses skills gaps, and improves employee performance and job satisfaction.

Key Findings from the 2025 Onboarding Survey

(2000 survey respondents in US and UK)

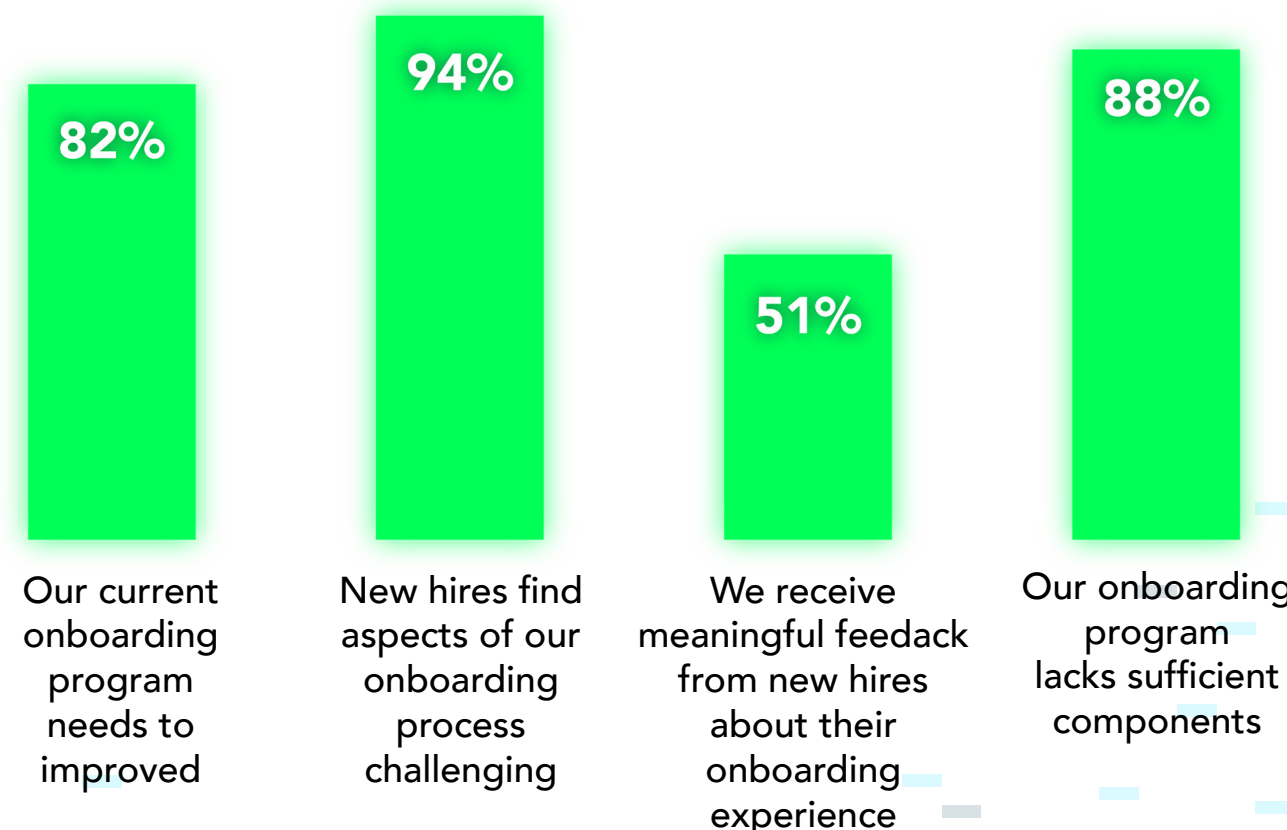
Onboarding Is a Universal Pain Point — But for Different Reasons

When asked, *"How much do you feel your current onboarding program needs to improve?"* a significant majority of respondents, **82%**, said there was room for improvement.

Furthermore, nearly half of survey respondents found each onboarding challenge on the survey list to be either 'significant' or 'very significant.'

Younger workers (18 - 44) cited a lack of engagement and overwhelming information as most problematic, while older workers (45+) focused on the negative impacts on job performance.

The most cited negative impacts of poor onboarding were lack of confidence (**over 50%**), low job satisfaction, and reduced productivity.



Impact of poor onboarding experience:

60% of 18-24-year-olds said poor onboarding negatively impacts their confidence, compared to 55% for the whole baseline. 52% felt this impacted productivity, and 48% felt it negatively affected job performance.

Top negative impacts of poor onboarding:

Lack of confidence - baseline

55%

Lack of confidence - 18 - 24

60%

Low job satisfaction

52%

Reduced productivity

52%

Poor job performance

48%

Is your onboarding success negatively impacted by problems with retention of the information?

81% of 18-24-year-olds feel that their onboarding success is negatively impacted by this. Similar statistics were found for the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups.

If you could implement "Learning-by-doing" using Realistic AI game-based conversation simulations, do you feel this would improve your onboarding process?

67% said yes, compared to just 13% who said no. Younger age groups, specifically 25-34 and 35-44, were more likely to say yes at 79% and 74%, respectively.

Recommendations:

Realistic and immersive simulation training is an effective way to implement a "learning by doing" approach, whilst also providing a safe space to learn with live feedback and support.

Increased repetition directly correlates with improved information retention, which is why gamified training is a highly impactful method for onboarding.

New hires often find the following aspects of the onboarding process challenging:

54% of respondents suggested that learning job-specific tasks was most challenging.

51% found navigating company systems and tools most challenging, implying that real-life simulations are highly valuable.

Skills Masking and Skills Gaps Anxiety Are Widespread

Have you ever experienced "skill masking" - hiding or downplaying your skill gaps at work to avoid judgment or negative consequences?

58% of respondents reported experiencing skill masking.

Mentorship or buddy systems play a crucial role in our onboarding process:

72% agree with this.

Recommendations:

A combination of human and AI support is the most effective. With more human-like AI assistants, co-pilots, and coaches available to the workforce, personalized support and mentorship can be delivered in a scalable way.

To support successful onboarding on systems, **Attensi PROCESS** allows users to train in a simulated version of the system where they can practice realistic scenarios.

Attensi client "EQ" saw 3x ROI due to their onboarding solution, reducing both training time and churn since implementation.

1/3 workers under 45 reports skill-set anxiety



58% of employees admit to Skills Masking



Impact Data Measurement is Common, but Not Standardized

92% of organisations measure onboarding success, but no single metric dominates. Feedback surveys are the most used at 49%, indicating a fragmented approach to evaluation. However, data is critical to securing the necessary funding and resources for L&D initiatives, including onboarding.

When we asked ‘If we had better analysis of the impact of training, we would be able to secure more funding for L&D resources?’ the results are clear:

71% of respondents agreed with this statement.
78% agreed this is at least ‘very important.’

Better onboarding practices can reduce employee churn:

78% of respondents agreed with this.

Recommendations:

Ensure you are equipped with an AI tool that can analyze quantitative and qualitative data quickly at a micro and macro level, as tools like Attensi AI INSIGHTS are highly valuable to leadership and L&D teams.

If a confidential, AI-powered tool lets you privately practice and improve your job-critical skills, how likely would you be to use it?

68% said yes overall.
This feeling was more acute for younger age groups, with 80% of 25–34-year-olds saying yes.

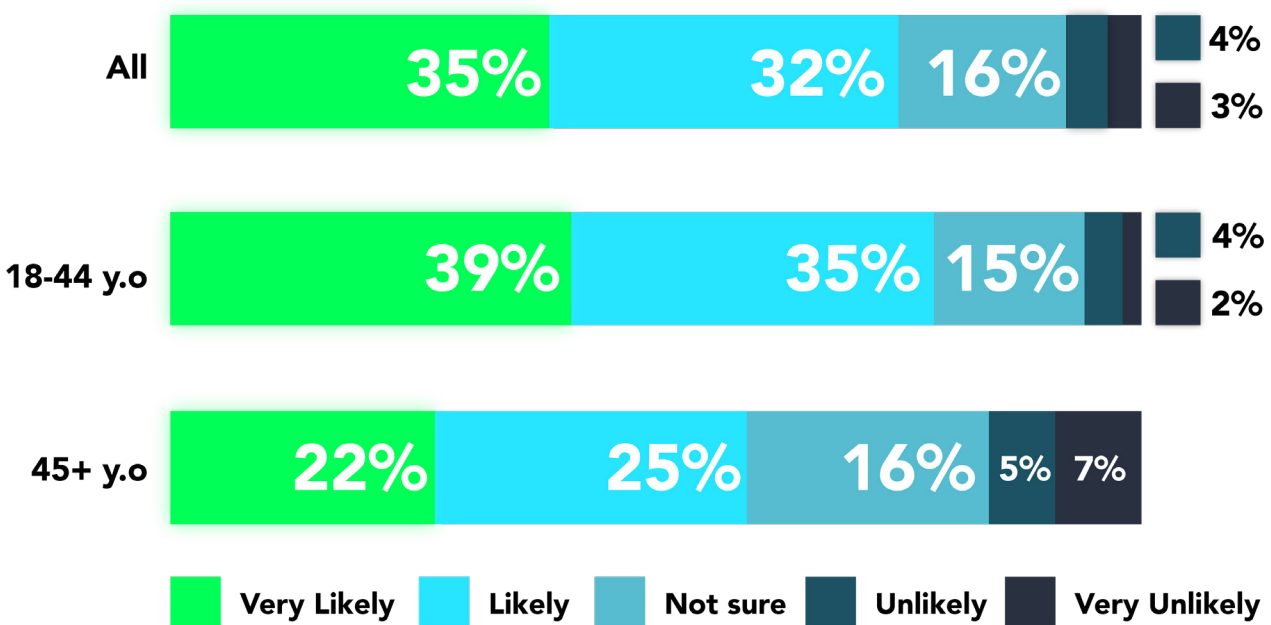
Resistance to Innovation Is Generational

Younger employees are more open to analytics and AI-powered tools, whilst older employees are more sceptical and prefer traditional ROI metrics.

AI-Powered Training Tools Have Strong Appeal

67% of respondents would use a confidential, AI-powered skills practice tool. This suggests a strong demand for private, personalized onboarding solutions.

If a confidential, AI-powered tool let you privately practice and improve your job-critical skills, how likely would you be to use it ?



Case Studies: Onboarding in Action

YMCA: Transforming Onboarding with Attensi

The YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas faced a high staff turnover and struggled to meet the demand for consistent, high-quality training content at scale for its diverse workforce of over 2,200 full-time, part-time, and seasonal staff.

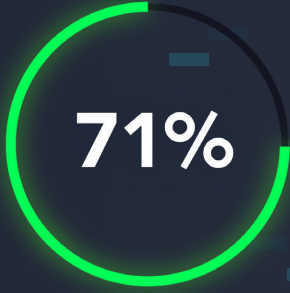
By partnering with Attensi, they implemented gamified simulations that allowed new hires to practice real-world scenarios in a safe environment.

This approach improved confidence, reduced time to competence, and increased engagement. Critically, the training reduced employee turnover by 71%, a major KPI for the YMCA, therefore significantly reducing recruitment costs.

"All of our staff now, all 2,200 staff, are all onboarded the same exact way."

- Suzanne Goswick, Senior VP & CHRO - Y Dallas

Results:



Reduced new employee turnover by:



Satisfaction with the training recorded by managers.



Overall satisfaction rates recorded for new joiners.



Circle K

"Working closely with Attensi, we crafted a solution to deliver a large amount of information in an engaging, digestible, and measurable way. Our game-based training addresses onboarding struggles in Europe and the U.S."

Effective onboarding is crucial. High engagement levels, where new employees enjoy and benefit from the training, lead to happier teams, satisfied customers, and higher retention. The versatility of game-based training allows individuals to engage with content in various ways."

- Sue Vandersall, Circle K senior VP of global talent development

"Our people are like rockstars and we can set them up for success."

- Jens Rye - Circle K

"It has helped us increase merchandise sales and basket size while reducing employee turnover".

- Kristian Planke Styrmø - Circle K

Results:

14K employees engaged in "Beat the Boss"



Knowledge gap closure:



Results:

3 x ROI thanks to reduced training times and reduced staff churn

Simulated experiential training was vital for proficiency at EQ, significantly reducing time to competency.

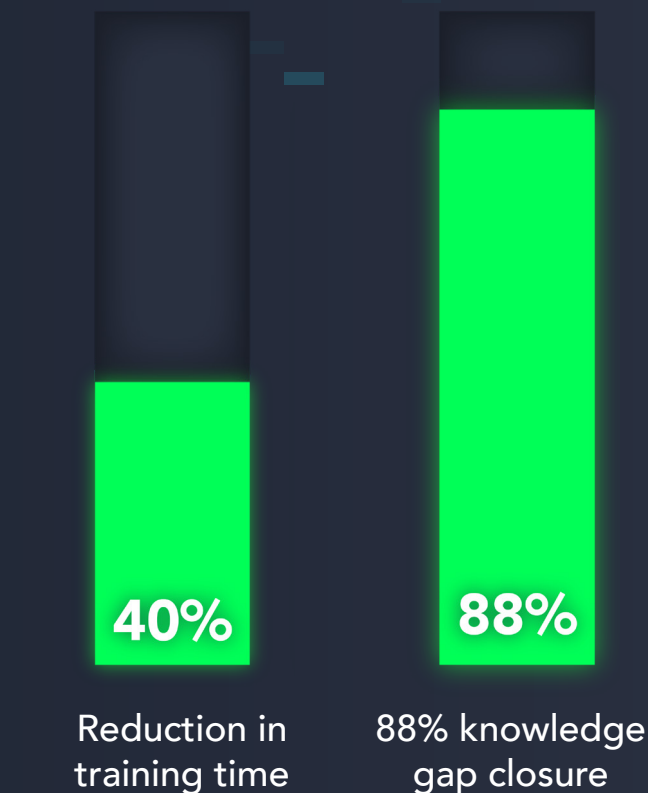
Simulated experiential training was vital to proficiency – reducing time to competency.

"Attensi puts people in the position of having more confidence when they arrive on the phone and they are dealing with those real-world situations.

Repetition is extremely important – especially in this job.

[Simulations] allow people to get more experience. Really you can only get to a point of proficiency in this role through experience. Attensi allows us to ramp up that experience."

John Horvarth,
Operations, Product
and Client Services.
- EQ



Deep Dive: Survey Analysis and Insights

"The data shows a clear mismatch between how organizations evaluate onboarding and what employees actually experience," said Trond Aas, CEO of Attensi.

"Too often, success is measured by checklists, not mastery and confidence. And when employees don't feel safe learning in person, they mask their gaps rather than close them."

This phenomenon, rooted in what the study terms **skill-set anxiety**, is especially pronounced among younger workers. Over half of employees aged 18-44 report frequent worries about being underqualified, and **29%** say this anxiety strongly reflects their experience on the job.

Importantly, these feelings take root early: the most common reported consequence of poor onboarding isn't churn or performance — but **diminished confidence (55%)**.

Yet the report offers hope. Despite the stigma, most employees (**58%**) say they would feel comfortable admitting skill gaps to a manager. Even more strikingly, two-thirds (**67%**) express willingness to use confidential, AI-powered role-play tools to practice and strengthen job-critical skills privately.



Trond Aas, CEO Attensi

"The good news is that technology is catching up to human psychology. AI-powered simulations now allow people to rehearse tough conversations, practice decision-making, and close real skill gaps without fear of embarrassment.

For organizations serious about performance, the key is creating environments where people can safely stop pretending and start progressing.

The full findings offer organizations rich insight into how confidence, safety, and digital tools intersect to shape onboarding and upskilling outcomes.

Skill masking is what happens when people don't feel safe learning in front of others. They hide uncertainty, perform surface competence, and miss the chance to truly master their roles.

The data shows a clear mismatch between how organizations evaluate onboarding and what employees actually experience.

Survey Analysis and Insights

Too often, success is measured by checklists, not confidence. And when employees don't feel safe to share weaknesses, they mask their gaps rather than close them. This also creates a lot of bad data for employers who are trying to benchmark skills and implement training programs to improve employee confidence and performance.

The good news is that technology is catching up to human psychology. AI-powered simulations now allow people to rehearse tough conversations, practice decision-making, and close real skill gaps without fear of embarrassment.

For organizations serious about performance, the key is creating environments where people can safely stop pretending and start progressing.”
- Trond Aas, CEO Attensi



Skill masking is what happens when people don't feel safe learning in front of others.

They hide uncertainty, perform surface competence, and miss the chance to truly master their roles.

Digital Transformation is leaving older generations behind, but it doesn't have to.

As onboarding tools become more digital, data-driven, and AI-enhanced, organizations are accelerating their investments in scalable learning solutions.

But the survey reveals a blind spot: **older generations are less likely to feel included in this evolution.** They're more skeptical of gamification, less confident in analytics, and less likely to find value in feedback systems and mentorship models.

This isn't resistance for the sake of it—it's a signal.

While younger employees embrace fast, tech-enabled onboarding ecosystems, older employees are often operating with outdated support structures and little say in how new systems are designed. The result? A growing equity gap between **digital natives** and **digital migrants**.

If the goal of onboarding is to build confident, competent, and committed employees, then organizations can't afford to treat older generations as edge cases.

Instead, the next wave of onboarding strategy should ask:

How do we create systems that meet everyone where they are — and bring everyone forward?

This means designing with multiple learning styles in mind, offering alternate paths to competence, and building cultures that normalize asking for help at any age.

Digital transformation is inevitable. Generational inclusivity isn't. It has to be intentional.

Metrics are everywhere. Strategy is nowhere.

Most companies measure their onboarding programs—but few know what those metrics are really telling them.

One team tracks time to productivity.
Another uses feedback surveys.
A third counts retention.

The result? An ecosystem of fragmented data with no unifying story.

This survey makes it clear: while **92%** of respondents use at least one success metric, no single metric is used by even half of them.

Many organizations are measuring onboarding because they're supposed to — not because they've defined what a great onboarding experience means for their business.

Without strategy, measurement becomes noise.

Teams collect data but don't trust it. Dashboards fill up with activity, not insight. And onboarding stays stuck in reactive mode—tweaking tactics without ever redesigning for outcomes.

If we want onboarding to drive real value, we need to stop asking, *"What can we measure?"* and start asking,

"What are we trying to accomplish?"
Then build systems that measure that—and use the results to inform the next generation of onboarding design.

The Data: Significant Onboarding Challenges

This survey tested five challenges related to the experience of the onboarding process.

All challenges were found either very significant or significant by nearly half of respondents.

This tight grouping suggests no singular dominant experiential challenge, complicating the work of improving onboarding.

Impact of Poor Onboarding

Lack of confidence is the number one negative impact of a poor onboarding experience, cited by over half of respondents. This is followed by lack of job satisfaction, low productivity, and poor job performance.

Less than a third of respondents (**31%**) see poor onboarding as responsible for high churn rates or a lack of brand loyalty (**33%**).

The data reveals some significant differences in generational perspectives. Younger respondents are far more likely to attribute a lack of confidence and lack of brand loyalty to a bad onboarding experience, whereas older respondents are more likely to see poor onboarding as a contributing factor to poor job performance.

11% of respondents from older generations are "Onboarding Skeptics," compared to only **4%** of respondents from younger generations.

Full-time employees and younger generation respondents are the most sensitive to the impact of onboarding on employment experience.

Perspectives on Onboarding Effectiveness:

75% of respondents would agree that onboarding success is negatively impacted by problems with information retention.

55% of respondents find it challenging to deliver consistent onboarding across regions.

On the other hand, **78%** of respondents feel they have enough time and resources to create high-quality training and onboarding content, though only **30%** would say this is 'consistent.'

Leadership buy-in is relatively high, with **60%** of respondents finding that executives understand the value of onboarding.

Impact of Poor Onboarding

Age cohorts vary considerably in their perspectives.

Younger respondents are more likely to see the onboarding process as negatively impacted by information retention problems and regional consistency, but also far more likely to feel they have enough time and resources and to be confident in leadership buy-in.

New hires often find the following aspects of the onboarding process challenging

Learning job-specific tasks is the most common challenge, followed by navigating company systems and tools and managing workload expectations. These are core job competencies, so this makes sense.

The most common gaps in onboarding programs are interactive activities, peer mentorship, and support from managers.

Note that while 88% cite at least one area, none of the options exceed 42%, suggesting that insufficiencies vary by program rather than onboarding as a practice experiencing a systemic flaw.

Attempts to Improve Onboarding

88% of respondents have improved their onboarding process with at least one of the strategies tested. The use of technology and tools and structured training programs are the most common, both endorsed by 45% of respondents.

Only 26% of respondents have used gamification techniques. Of those who have, 57% found them effective.

Compare this to mentorship and buddy systems, which 72% of respondents found effective.

92% measure the success of their onboarding program, but the methods are unsystematic. The most common metric, feedback surveys, is used by only 49% of respondents. Respondents from older generations are significantly more pessimistic than their younger counterparts.

Only 72% have improved their programs through the measured results, and only 82% measure their program success.

Older generations are less likely to incorporate new hire feedback and less likely to see the value of mentorship or buddy systems.

Learning and Development

90% of respondents see L&D as undervalued, with budget constraints (48%) being the most common reason. Lack of awareness of L&D's benefit to an organization (43%) and competing priorities (42%) are second and third, respectively. Interestingly, only 31% of respondents cited a lack of immediate ROI.

While not explicitly connected to L&D, respondents across the board agree that better onboarding practices can reduce employee churn and have a positive impact on long-term employee performance and retention.

90% of respondents report attempting to justify the cost of investing in L&D to senior management, with showing increased employee productivity (55%) being the most common strategy.

Respondents from older generations are significantly less likely to attempt to justify the cost of L&D, with 23% reporting to have not attempted any of the tested strategies.

Measurement and Analytics

On average, just under two-thirds of respondents actively collect and leverage onboarding data.

Younger generation respondents are nearly twice as likely to capture benchmark scoring for onboarding and to have access to and make use of quality insights tools.

They are also more likely to set clear KPIs for onboarding and to have the analytics and data necessary to prove ROI.

Only a third of older generation respondents capture benchmark scoring.

Generational differences also manifest in confidence and skepticism about the value of analytics.

While 72% of younger respondents believe their analytics tools are capable of identifying knowledge gaps, only 46% of older respondents feel the same.

Skill Gaps, Skill Masking, and Other Anxieties

Over half of respondents (51%) worry that they lack some of the skills needed to succeed in their current role at least occasionally.

18% experience this worry 'frequently' or more often. This anxiety is more pronounced among younger respondents, with 53% experiencing it at least 'occasionally' compared to only 44% of older respondents.

Note that 10% of the total respondents (and 21% of older respondents) opted not to answer any of the 13 skill gap questions.

This suggests a lingering uncomfortableness with expressing vulnerability, even in an anonymous survey.

46% have **faked** their understanding of something at work



Despite these anxieties, more than half of respondents (58%) feel comfortable admitting a skill gap to a manager, and 58% feel they can admit these skill gaps without negative consequences. 65% of respondents say their manager creates an environment where it is safe to ask for support.

Nearly two-thirds of organizations (63%) provide training to help employees keep up with skill demands. Younger generation respondents are more likely to endorse this.

Interest in training extends to innovative tools like AI.

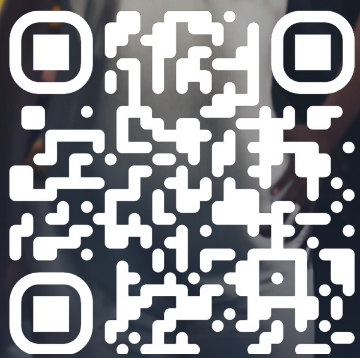
When asked if they would be interested in using an AI-powered tool to confidentially improve job-critical skills, two-thirds of respondents (67%) said they would be 'likely' or 'very likely' to use it. Only 7% of respondents said they would be unlikely.

51% sometimes feel **underqualified**



Ready to see for yourself how gamified simulation training works?

Good choice.



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