JackrabbitLX

INDUSTRY RESEARCH

# The JLX Learning Professionals Future Skills Report

The first structured, comparative look at what learning professionals believe they need to remain effective over the next three years, and where they believe their organizations are falling short.

**April 6 – May 18, 2026**
Survey window

**197**
Respondents analyzed

**Six world regions**
Reach

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## SECTION 1 · EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from the JLX Learning Professionals Skills Survey, collected from 197 respondents across sectors, career levels, and regions in the spring of 2026. It is the first structured, comparative look at what learning professionals believe they need to remain effective over the next three years and where they believe their organizations are falling short.

Learning professionals sort the nine skills in this survey into three clear tiers. The top tier holds three skills that are statistically inseparable: **learning strategy and design thinking** (M = 4.48), **AI tools and automation** (M = 4.46), and **stakeholder influence and strategic communication** (M = 4.39). Of the three, only **AI tools and automation** is a technical skill; the other two are durable. The bottom tier holds the profession's traditional production core: **learning technology (LMS, authoring tools)**, **facilitation and delivery**, and **content development**. The skills the field built its identity on rank at the bottom of its own three-year priorities.

"**Storytelling and narrative design**" shows the largest gap between what practitioners value and what they believe their employers value, a mean difference of +0.60 points, statistically significant at $p < .001$. Half of respondents rate it higher for themselves than for their employer; fewer than one in ten rate it higher for their employer.

"**Data analysis and reporting**" is the only skill where perceived employer expectations exceed practitioner priorities. The effect is small but directionally significant. Practitioners might be saying this based on a belief that employer demand for data is driven partly by organizational visibility rather than learning quality, but more research is needed to confirm underlying beliefs.

"Time" is the most cited barrier to skill development, but it masks three structurally different problems: workload displacement, organizational indifference, and personal life constraints. Each requires a different response. Treating them as one produces solutions that address none of them well.

Part B surfaces three patterns worth watching: the profession is not unified on AI, practitioners under time and budget pressure are choosing the development formats that fit inside those constraints, and the "time" barrier runs deeper than any single intervention can reach.

Part C documents something the survey did not intend to surface: a substantial portion of respondents used open-text fields to describe a profession whose institutions are not keeping pace, employers who treat practitioner development as an afterthought, a professional development market that is often out of reach, and a field that has not yet learned to articulate its own value.

The ultimate goal of this research is a skills roadmap for learning professionals, built from practitioner data, tested across sectors, and designed for the moment. More research is needed before we can build that roadmap, but this is a good start.

## SECTION 2 · WHY THIS RESEARCH? WHY NOW? WHAT DID WE SEEK TO LEARN?

Like those in most digital industries, learning professionals are being asked to change and adapt faster than ever. Roles are being restructured. New job titles are surfacing. New team structures. New theories of working. New workflows. Some of these changes are not minor evolutionary changes. They are step changes. As we grapple with all of these practical and objective changes to our profession, there are many important questions we should be asking ourselves. One question that we, at Jackrabbit Learning Experience, think is critical to answer:

> **What do we, the learning professionals that are involved in creating learning experiences for every other field, think are the most important skills we need to be successful in the next three years?**

We set out to answer that question with an industry survey. The survey data was collected in the Spring of 2026. This marks at least three years after the time when the general public gained access to powerful AI tools. We are beyond the point where the Learning Profession is asking "should we pay attention to AI?" (See Section 5 for more on the context of this survey and the resulting report.)

We can provide a copy of the survey upon request and we will consider requests for the anonymized data. (Contact: letstalk@jackrabbitlx.com)

## SECTION 3 · METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on responses to the JLX Learning Professionals Skills Survey, a purpose-built instrument developed to answer one core question: what skills and professional development do learning professionals believe they need in the next three years to remain effective as AI reshapes the design, delivery, and strategy of learning?

The survey ran from April 6 to May 18, 2026. After exclusions, 197 completed responses are included in this analysis. Distribution was primarily network-driven through JLX's professional community, the AI Forum for Learning Professionals, LinkedIn outreach, and direct contact with academic programs. The constraints on data collection are addressed directly below.

### Who responded

Respondents work across multiple sectors: higher education and corporate learning contributed the largest shares (66 and 61 respondents respectively), with consulting, nonprofit, K-12, and government represented in smaller numbers. By job level: 107 respondents identified as senior-level (54%), 75 as mid-level (38%), and 15 as entry-level (8%). Geographically: 142 respondents are based in North America (72%), with representation from Europe, Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Oceania, and the Middle East.

#### Five limitations are worth naming directly:

**Entry-level practitioners are underrepresented.** At 8% of the sample, their perspective is present but not proportionate. Some of the most consequential questions in this report fall hardest on people just beginning their careers. We note where entry-level responses diverge from the broader sample and intend to address this gap in future research.

**The sample is not random.** Respondents were reached primarily through JLX's existing networks, which skews toward practitioners already engaged with questions about AI and professional development. Findings should be interpreted with that in mind.

**North America dominates.** International reach spans six world regions, but at a scale that limits confident cross-regional comparison. We treat international responses as directionally interesting rather than statistically representative.

**Six responses were excluded.** In each case, the respondent's described work fell outside the scope of the learning profession as defined by this survey. All six were removed prior to analysis; all findings are based on the remaining 197 responses.

**One survey item was interpreted inconsistently.** The professional development investment question asked respondents to rate their current investment capacity on a 1-5 scale, with no definition of "investment" provided in the live instrument. Analysis of open-text responses suggests respondents weighted time, money, energy, and organizational support differently. Findings from this item are treated as directional rather than precise.

#### Two notes on verification

The headline rating result in this report (the three-tier structure in Finding 1) was checked under multiple analytical approaches, including mean ratings, within-person comparisons, and rank-based tests; the same structure emerged each time. Findings drawn from open-text responses were confirmed through two independent coding passes, one working blind from the raw text and one coded against defined criteria, and the two passes agreed on all major themes.

#### Despite these limitations

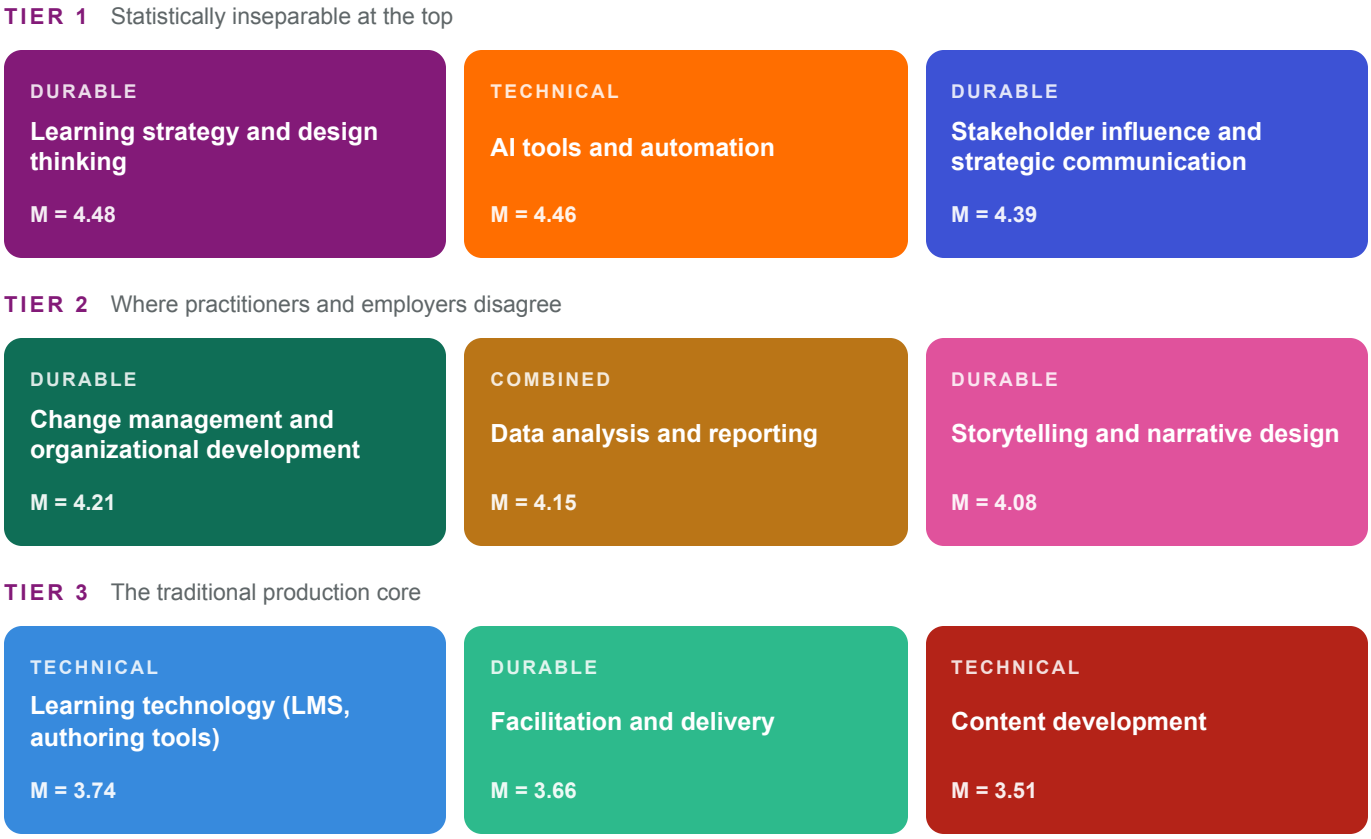
The survey (with 197 completed responses, collected across sectors, career levels, and regions at a specific moment of professional change) offers something useful to the learning profession: a structured, comparable snapshot of what engaged learning professionals believe about their own readiness, their skill priorities, and the direction of their field.

PART A · KEY FINDINGS (WITH HIGH CONFIDENCE)

## Finding: Respondents sorted nine skills into three clear tiers. The top tier pairs durable skills with AI.

Respondents were asked to rate nine skills on a five-point scale (where 5 = highest importance). These skills were purposefully chosen to represent recognizable skills to learning professionals, spanning both technical and durable skill sets, as identified below. The durable, technical, and combined labels were not present in the survey.

The respondents did not produce a single winner. They produced three clear tiers.




*The nine skills, grouped into the three tiers that emerged and colored by type. Skills within a tier are statistically indistinguishable; the breaks between tiers are significant.*

No test we ran could separate the top three from each other. Every test separated them from the skills below. While "AI skills" could be a very large array of skills, we chose to say "**AI tools and automation**" making it more clearly a technical skill. Of note, this is the only technical skill in the top tier. The other two are durable skills. Practitioners are not choosing between AI fluency and the skills that decide what to build and how to be heard. They are placing them together at the top.

The middle tier is where practitioners and their employers disagree. The two findings that follow both live here. The bottom tier holds the profession's traditional production core. The skills the field built its identity on rank at the bottom of its own three-year priorities. The skills at the top are the ones about deciding what to build, working with machines, and being heard.

The tier structure is not an artifact of one method. We checked it under multiple analytical approaches, including mean ratings, within-person comparisons that control for how generously each respondent used the scale, and rank-based tests. The same three tiers emerged each time.

Within the top tier, **learning strategy and design thinking** holds one real distinction: the broadest consensus in the dataset. 89.3% of respondents rated it 4 or 5, the highest proportion of any skill, and it produced the lowest standard deviation (SD = 0.80), against a range of 0.85 to 1.15 across the other eight items. That reflects a broadly shared view, not a skewed one.

Whether the top tier looks the same for practitioners at the start of their careers is a question this sample cannot settle. Entry-level respondents show a similar pattern, but at 8% of the sample we treat that as directional. It is one of the questions future research should pursue. In fact, there are many questions this survey creates about those early in their careers because of the lack of representation.

## Finding: Practitioners value "storytelling and narrative design" significantly more than they believe their employers do

Respondents rated "**storytelling and narrative design**" at M = 4.08 (SD = 1.04) for their own career priorities, and at M = 3.48 (SD = 1.26) from the perspective of their employer or clients, a mean difference of +0.60 points. A paired-samples t-test confirmed this gap is statistically significant, $t(196) = 7.61$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.54$. The median individual-level gap is +1.0: the typical respondent places **storytelling and narrative design** a full point higher for themselves than they believe their employer does.

> **5×** **as many respondents rated storytelling and narrative design more important to themselves than to their employer (50.3% vs 9.6%), the most skewed directional distribution of any skill in the dataset.**

The gap might exist because narrative design is hard to point to in a budget conversation or deliverable checklist. Storytelling "impact" is very hard to put on a dashboard. Learning professionals who want to close the gap need to make the craft visible through evaluation frameworks that connect design decisions to behavioral outcomes, and portfolio work that shows quantifiable difference when storytelling and narrative are used in a learning experience.

One additional finding connects here: "**storytelling and narrative design**" is the only skill in this dataset significantly correlated with professional confidence ($r = 0.15$, $p = .036$). Whether strong narrative skills produce confidence, or confidence creates the conditions to develop them, we cannot say. Either way, investment in storytelling is also an investment in how settled practitioners feel about their professional future.

Those confident in their skillset to stand the test of time, specifically at a time of unprecedented change, think **storytelling and narrative design** will be a valuable skill for learning professionals.

## Finding: "Data analysis and reporting" is the only skill where perceived employer expectations exceed practitioner priorities

Reminder, this is the only skill item that purposefully combines technical and durable skills. Data analysis often requires both.

Moreover, "**data analysis and reporting**" is the only one where respondents attributed greater importance to their employer than to themselves. Practitioners rated it at M = 4.15 (SD = 0.96) for their own priorities, and M = 4.31 (SD = 0.92) from their employer's perspective, a mean difference of -0.16 points, $t(196) = -2.62$, $p = .010$, Cohen's $d = -0.19$, 95% CI [-0.29, -0.04]. The effect size is small, but the direction is the point: every other skill in the dataset runs the other way.

At the individual level, the gap is carried by a subset rather than felt uniformly. 25.9% rated **data analysis and reporting** higher from the employer perspective; 15.2% rated it higher personally; 58.9% assigned equal ratings. That asymmetry is what produces the significant negative mean.

The most useful interpretation is not that practitioners undervalue data skills. They rate "**data analysis and reporting**" fifth-highest of any skill for their own priorities. What the finding suggests is that practitioners sense employer demand for data is driven partly by organizational visibility (dashboards, completion metrics, evaluation reports) rather than by its contribution to learning quality. Data outputs are legible to stakeholders who lack domain expertise. In environments under pressure to justify learning investment, that legibility has its own value, separate from whether better data actually produces better learning.

Employers are signaling demand for data skills above practitioner preference while simultaneously undervaluing "**storytelling and narrative design**" and "**learning strategy and design thinking**." We could think about redirecting employers that are looking for this data skillset by using measurement as the vehicle for surfacing the value of durable skills. A learning strategist could show how completion and assessment data trace positive outcomes back to instructional design that uses **storytelling and narrative design**. That would make the design strategy visible, using data.

PART B · PATTERNS WORTH WATCHING

The findings in Part A are stable enough to act on and some of it is already happening, but the professional development available to learning professionals remains too siloed. The need for professional development is clear, but these data showed that learning professionals want more.

What follows in Part B are patterns that showed up clearly enough to name, but that we are not yet prepared to characterize with confidence. We are publishing them here because they are shaping the questions we will take into future research, and because practitioners reading this report will likely recognize them immediately.

## Pattern: The profession is not monolithic on AI

When asked to name the single most important competency for the next three years, 44% of respondents named something AI-related. That number aggregates positions that are not actually the same position. The research team identified at least five distinct orientations in the open-text responses:

- practitioners already building agentic workflows at scale
- practitioners who have integrated AI and found stable footing
- practitioners still working through the transition
- practitioners actively resisting
- practitioners focused primarily on preserving human judgment in an AI-assisted environment

At one end, respondents describe productivity gains they would not trade back. At the other, were quotes like the following:

> *"I feel like I'm being set up to fail."*

The profession's public discourse on AI tends to flatten this range. Adoption rates and enthusiasm scores treat the field as moving in one direction at different speeds. The responses we gathered suggest some practitioners are arriving at different destinations. What drives that divergence could be access, organizational support, career stage, or something else. This is a question that is calling for future research.

## Pattern: Practitioners are choosing the development formats that fit inside their constraints

We asked which professional development formats work best right now. The answer has a clear shape.

- Workshops and hands-on practice (39.6%)
- Self-paced online courses (37.6%)
- Webinars (33.5%)
- Peer communities and networks (31.5%)
- Mentorship or coaching (29.9%)

The formats that demand the most money and committed time sit at the bottom: certification programs (17.8%), in-person conferences (17.3%), online conferences (17.3%), online cohort programs (12.7%), and accredited post-secondary education (7.6%). (The typical respondent selected three formats.)

The dominant barriers in this dataset are time and money. The formats practitioners are choosing are the ones that flex around a full workload and a thin budget: hands-on, self-paced, peer-based. The formats they are not choosing are the ones that require an employer's tuition and time away from delivery.

The capacity numbers point the same direction. Half of respondents (51.8%) rate their current ability to invest in their own development at 4 or 5 on a five-point scale; 17.8% rate it at 1 or 2. Respondents who report low

investment capacity describe structural constraints: chronic illness, caregiving responsibilities, job market anxiety, organizational indifference. (As noted in the methodology, the term "investment" was interpreted inconsistently, but the written responses still show the pattern.) For anyone building professional development for this field, the implication is direct: meet practitioners inside their constraints. The workshop, the community of peers, and the mentor are the formats with room to reach them right now.

### Pattern: "Time" is not one problem

"Time" appears 141 times across 197 responses as a barrier to skill development. On closer reading it is at least three different problems: workload displacement, where professional responsibilities have expanded beyond any margin for development; organizational indifference, where employers do not treat practitioner development as worth protecting; and personal life constraints, where the barriers originate entirely outside work.

Respondents named all three directly.

> *"The tyranny of the urgent continues to limit the time I have to stop, think, plan, implement, evaluate/assess, and try again."*

> *"The skills we need to help others develop are connected to financial outcomes, so that is where we spend our time. Our ability to grow is viewed as marginally beneficial in comparison."*

> *"Time - work life balance with small children."*

Each structural problem requires a different response. Treating them as one produces solutions that address none of them well. Future research should ask about these constraints directly rather than deriving them from open-text responses designed for other purposes.

#### PART C · INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE IS WIDESPREAD AND UNPROMPTED (SEE ALSO: SECTION 5)

Respondents answered a question we didn't explicitly ask. We asked about skills, barriers, and what the field needs next. While we did ask about perceived employer priorities, we did not ask about workplace conditions, organizational support, leadership readiness, or the state of the professional development market. Three open-text questions gave respondents room to go where they wanted:

- Name the single most important competency for the next three years.
- What barriers limit your ability to develop new skills?
- Any additional thoughts about the field.

Across those three fields, a substantial portion of respondents, roughly one in five, used that room to address topics we hadn't raised. In their answers, they described:

- Employers who treat practitioner development as an afterthought

- Leaders who are not ready for the change they are asking their teams to lead
- A professional development market that is heavily commercialized and often out of reach
- A profession that has not yet learned to articulate its own value

These themes crossed sectors and career levels (corporate and higher education, senior and entry-level, North America and internationally). This is not a subgroup concern.

We are not in a position to fully characterize what this signal means. What we can say is that it showed up unprompted, across multiple questions, from practitioners who had no obvious reason to raise it. It is a direct target for future research.

The conditions practitioners are describing do not exist apart from the moment this data was collected. Section 5 addresses the moment.

## SECTION 5 · EXTERNAL CONTEXTS DURING THE "SEASON" OF THIS DATA COLLECTION (SPRING 2026)

This survey ran from April 6 to May 18, 2026. The conditions practitioners described are not complaints unique to this sample (budget pressure, organizational indifference, the pace of change outrunning institutional response).

Donald Taylor's 2026 L&D Global Sentiment Survey, drawing on 3,500+ respondents across 100 countries, describes this as the most significant set of findings in its thirteen-year history, not because they point to a single trend, but because established patterns are breaking down. Taylor notes anecdotal evidence of redundancies at all levels of the profession, rising use of the word "pressure" in responses, and a sense of entering unknown territory. The JLX data collected two months later is consistent with that picture.

https://donaldhtaylor.co.uk/research_base/global-sentiment-survey-2026/

The broader labor market confirms it. U.S. employers announced 60,620 job cuts in March 2026, up 25% from February, with AI explicitly cited in roughly 25% of those cuts. Companies are cutting generalist roles while hiring aggressively for AI-fluent ones, which seems to be the bifurcation our respondents are navigating.

https://www.challengergray.com/blog/challenger-report-march-cuts-rise-25-from-february-ai-leads-reasons/

The pace of new AI tool releases is a separate pressure that does not show up cleanly in any survey. Multiple respondents named it without prompting: the signal-to-noise problem, the impossibility of keeping up, the cognitive cost of perpetual reorientation. We hope the JLX survey fills a gap the existing research landscape has not addressed directly: what does near-term readiness look like for learning professionals?

## SECTION 6 · WHAT COMES NEXT

This is a hard moment for the profession. The data in this report reflects practitioners who are navigating many pressures: shrinking resources, accelerating change, and organizations that do not always recognize the value of what learning professionals bring. That is not a crisis unique to this sample. We hear these things anecdotally all the time.

What this data also shows is that learning professionals are clear-eyed about what they need. They are not waiting to be told. They have a considered view of the skills that will matter most, and a sharp sense of where their organizations are falling short.

**Here are some ideas from us about what could come next:**

**1. The Cross-sector Skills Roadmap for Learning Professionals needs builders.** The ultimate goal of this research is a skills roadmap for learning professionals, built from practitioner data and tested across sectors. We are looking for practitioners and industry partners interested in joining a committee to write it, grounded in what this data has taught us. If you want to be part of that, reach out: letstalk@jackrabbitlx.com

**2. The next survey will be better.** This survey taught us as much about how to ask as about what is true. Several questions this report raises (whether the top tier looks different earlier in a career, what drives the divergence on AI, how the time barrier decomposes when asked about directly) deserve an instrument designed to answer them. We are planning a stronger skills survey in the near future.

**3. The conversation continues across sectors.** The AI Forum for Learning Professionals runs live events and a Slack community dedicated to navigating the changes in the industry, and we host free working sessions for learning professionals every week. If this report named something you are living, we want to hear about it.