Which skills does your workforce need in the era of AI?

AI, remote work and generational change demand new capabilities. Here are the skills needed to keep pace.



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In a world of artificial intelligence (AI), an aging workforce and remote work, companies face a challenge that goes beyond adopting new technologies. There is an urgent need to redefine key skills for a new era and to improve companies' ability to attract and retain young talent.

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This is the conclusion of The Future of Work (in Spanish), a report by IESE's Maria Luisa Blazquez, Mireia Las Heras and Jordi Canals, with contributions from Francesc Arribas and Jose Perez del Valle. Based on data from a large sample of Spanish firms and international companies operating in Spain, the report warns that, amid the hype surrounding AI, many companies are unprepared for the profound changes that AI will bring to the way we work, lead, learn, organize and serve customers.

The companies surveyed value transversal skills such as teamwork, learning agility, execution, analytical thinking and innovation. However, these same companies face significant difficulties in finding such profiles:

- 92% of companies report major gaps in innovation ability
- 86% in execution capacity
- 85% in analytical skills

In terms of personal attitudes, the companies surveyed value commitment, initiative, respect and resilience, but also report notable gaps, especially among young people:

- 95% see lower-than-desired resilience
- 94% see a lack of initiative
- 89% identify a shortfall in autonomy

AI, much more than technology

Among the surveyed companies, 63% stated they are actively planning to adopt AI, with 86% of senior executives expecting such technologies to transform their businesses within the next five years. Productivity, customer service and the organization of work have all improved thanks to AI, the study notes.

However, adoption is slow: only 7% of companies have completed more than half of their implementation process. One key barrier is the lack of internal skills needed to successfully integrate AI across business functions. Critical capabilities identified include data analytics, knowledge of machine learning, and AI system development and maintenance.

But the report goes further: ethical values around the use of AI are considered fundamental competencies, both for young employees and senior leadership, along with management ability and analytical thinking.

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Leading virtual teams

Remote work is now established in many sectors and has reshaped the skills required of professionals. According to the report, learning agility, flexibility and autonomy topped the list of important skills to have.

But to truly thrive in remote environments, employees also need:

- time management skills
- discipline
- proactivity
- the ability to avoid procrastination

For leaders, the challenge is even greater: they must be able to lead virtual teams with clear communication, empathy, a shared vision and the ability to motivate remotely. This type of leadership is now more important in remote work environments for 86% of companies.

An aging workforce

Demographic shifts are also reshaping the labor landscape. In Spain, more than 30% of the population is expected to be aged 65 or over by 2050. This presents a challenge for companies around knowledge transfer and avoiding ageism. The report highlights initiatives aimed at eliminating age-related bias in hiring, promoting intergenerational mentoring programs and ensuring continuous training across all age groups.

It also stresses the need for company cultures that value not only digital skills, but also strategic experience to foster inclusive, age-diverse workplaces that recognize the strengths of different generations.

About the research

This is the latest report published as part of IESE's Education for Jobs Initiative, capturing the perspectives of companies on how professional skills are evolving, as well as the outlook on youth employment and the training needed to meet future demands. It is based on a structured survey of HR, Talent and People executives from 81 leading companies operating in Spain (both Spanish and international) across 18 sectors. The authors note that the broad responsibilities and knowledge of these professionals ensure the quality of the responses and data used. The survey results were supplemented with in-depth interviews with executives

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from 17 of the participating companies.

Read about the 2023 Education for Jobs Initiative report here.

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