



Meeting the Future: The Vital Role of Professional Development

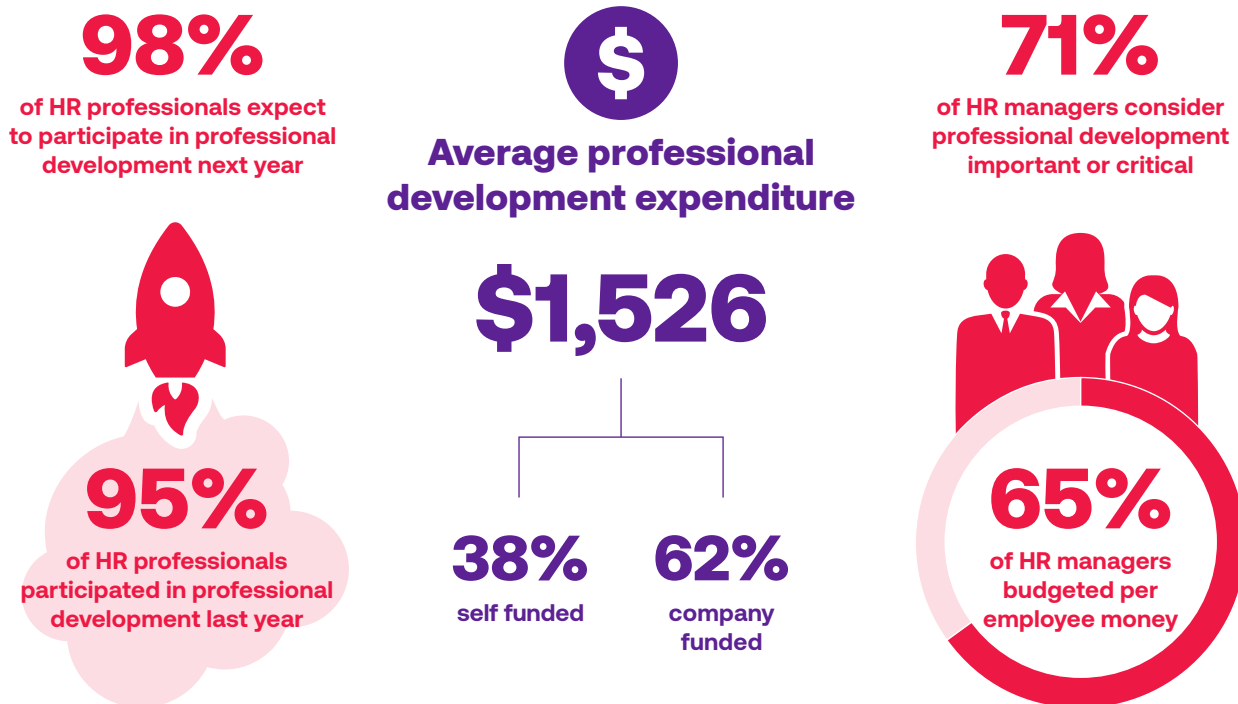
In a workplace marked by tectonic changes, effective HR learning is more critical than ever. Here are several high-impact strategies.

In a fast-changing workplace, few things are more important to an effective HR team than professional development.

Consider how much change is taking place. In the last year alone, many HR teams have had to address remote work, diversity programs, artificial intelligence, workplace conflict, and emergency response—and that's in addition to hiring, benefits, compliance, and other traditional HR functions.

The implication is clear: Professional development is a vital hedge in a workplace that is evolving more quickly than many organizations can adjust. There's a reason that 95% of HR professionals participated in some form of professional development last year and 98% planned to do so this year, according to the massive industry survey in HRCI's [State of HR](#) report. One in four HR managers named professional development as a critical priority this year and 46% said it is "very important."

"How we train and learn matters," said Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI. "Our ability to meet the future depends on it. Professional development is not just 'nice to have.' It is essential to manage a workforce that will look and behave very differently with each passing year."



The numbers show that HR professionals understand there is work ahead, especially in areas like technology where sustained learning—not just a single training—is often needed. They also show that HR professionals are certain they can meet that challenge. In recent HRCI surveys, more than half (57%) say new technology sometimes scares them. Yet nearly all (97%) say they are confident they can learn those technologies.

Whether companies help HR teams in that journey is less clear. A recent HRCI survey showed that 81% of HR professionals say their organization does not spend enough on professional development for human resources.

“HR professionals love to learn, and organizations should capitalize on that,” Dufrane said. “This means more than just increasing spend or adding opportunities. It means aligning training and development with strategic needs in the organization so that we are acquiring the skills needed to adapt. Organizations that do this correctly will have a real edge moving forward.”

The Vital Role of Preparation

HRCI data shows that, for HR professionals, feeling prepared at work is closely linked to fulfillment on the job.

HRCI’s State of HR survey showed that the more prepared HR professionals feel, the happier they are at work. In fact, those who describe their department as completely prepared are nearly three times more likely to be what we call “HR Evangelists” than those who feel minimally prepared.

(For the purposes of analysis, an HR Evangelist is defined as someone who enjoys working in HR, is likely to recommend the field to others, and is not considering a career in another profession. About 37% of survey respondents met those criteria.)

HRCI was so interested in this connection that we asked our data specialists to study it further. The result was a complete report: [The Secret Ingredients of Workplace Fulfillment](#). What they found is that feeling prepared is not just a trait of highly content HR professionals. It is a determining factor, and among the most powerful actionable key drivers that leadership can focus on when building successful HR teams.

“The data really underlines the importance of professional development,” said Michael Sosnowski, director of research and market insights at HRCI. “It’s an actionable insight. Improving access to quality learning is something managers can do right now to build a happier, more committed team and a more fulfilling workplace.”



How We Learn Today

To better understand how HR professionals view and practice professional learning, the State of HR survey did a deep dive into opinions, practices, and trends. What the survey found is that HR professionals are indeed life-long learners with a deep interest in keeping up in their industry. Whether and how their organizations facilitate that learning seems to vary widely.

The average total spend on professional development in 2025 was \$1,526 per person, with well over a third of that amount (\$585) coming out of pocket. In 2026, the average total spend was expected to be a bit lower at \$1,464. Two-thirds of managers said they formally budget for professional development, averaging \$1,274 per employee for 2026.

Whether you deem those numbers high or low, HR professionals report mixed results when it comes to the quality of their education. Nearly as many rated it “excellent” (24%) as rated it “fair,” “poor,” or “very poor” (21%).

“Spending is not always a proxy for quality,” Dufrane said. “The most effective learning solutions are those that align with your organization’s priorities and speak authentically to your team. A big budget won’t help if the training does not address your priorities and resonate well.”

HR professionals lean heavily on online instruction. In the survey, 89% said they attended a webinar; 64% said they took one or more self-directed online HR courses; and 46% participated in an online HR community. HR professionals expected these preferences to hold in 2026, with one exception: fully half (50%) say they are interested in conferences this year, up from 42% last year.

The topics that HR professionals focus on tend to be directed by where they feel confident and where they think there is work to be done. For example, only 11% describe recruiting, hiring, and termination as areas where they feel least prepared. Accordingly, 13% listed those areas as top priorities for professional development this year.

Areas HR professionals feel most and least prepared to handle



Source: HRCI State of HR survey

Taking Charge of Your Learning

HR professionals who want to learn do not have to wait for a company program. There is much you can do on your own.

“Confidence is important,” Dufrane said. “We all want to feel good about our work product and abilities. That’s why professional development is so critical. It is a lever every one of us can use throughout our career to ensure we are nimble enough to respond to whatever the environment may bring.”

While the internet is awash in free options, HRCI offers low- and no-cost tools designed by HR experts. For example:

- **HRCI Learning Center.** More than 220 courses are available, including 34 certificate programs, all worth recertification credit and curated by HR experts to meet real-world demands. Visual learning, audio narration, and interactive modules are available to accommodate all learning styles.
- **Webinar Hub.** HRCI’s two flagship series, [HRCI Insights](#) and [Alchemizing HR](#), offer information on the latest trends and strategies. Free of charge, these webinars air weekly and are worth recertification credit. Replays are available for 30 days after live events.
- **HRCI ONE.** A single, all-access subscription combines certification prep, exam and application fees, HRCI Learning Center courses and certificates, and recertification fees. Pay once and access is available for 365 days.

By contrast, developing business-aligned HR strategy is an area where HR professionals feel less confident. Twenty-eight percent say their job is mostly administrative or operational, with limited strategic input. Only one in 10 considers themselves an “essential strategic leader.” Significantly, 28% count strategy as an area where they are least prepared, and more than half (51%) completed strategy training in 2025. This year, 37% count it as a top priority for professional development—more than any other area of focus.

There are also topics that appear to be evergreen. While only 18% say they are unprepared regarding compliance and risk, almost two-thirds (65%) trained on it last year, and more than one-third (35%) still count it as a top priority. Managing employee relations is similar. Twenty percent called it a weak spot, and 58% did training on it last year. Twenty-nine percent are making it a priority for professional development in 2026.

“Aligning education and training with company priorities is good business strategy,” Dufrane said. “But it also requires some forward thinking. We don’t want to focus solely on the needs we discovered yesterday. We want to spend some resources on the scenarios we will face tomorrow.”

Areas of focus for HR professionals



Source: HRCI State of HR survey



Misalignment in Technology Training

Technology is a clear example of an area where HR professionals are experiencing friction.

Half of those surveyed named implementing tech as the area they are least prepared to handle. Yet, only about a third (32%) said it is a key learning or professional development priority for 2026. In fact, almost four in 10 (38%) put it among their two lowest learning priorities.

Specifically for HR, this could represent a disconnect between professional needs and business investment this year.

Chris Scandlen, HRCI's chief innovation and information officer, says there could be many reasons for this. HR professionals may be waiting to see which systems or technologies their companies adopt or which take hold in the broader industry. In the case of specific systems, some professionals will have to wait for training as part of a company-wide implementation. Educational opportunities are also likely to increase in the next year as training around AI and other technologies becomes more common.

"Technology can be a bit more nebulous than some other types of learning, because it's constantly changing," Scandlen said. "But options are certain to increase as the newer technologies continue to solidify. We should see a great deal of growth in training in the coming months."

In general, do you agree or disagree with the statement: "New technology sometimes scares me."



Source: HRCI LinkedIn survey June 24-27, 504 respondents

How confident are you learning new technology?



Source: HRCI LinkedIn survey June 25-28, 932 respondents

The situation will almost certainly become more urgent as artificial intelligence becomes more common in the workplace. While surveys show that most HR professionals do not fear AI-related job loss, a majority do expect their job to change due to AI. Meanwhile, fewer than half are being trained by their companies on AI implementation and usage. When asked in a recent survey why that might be, 44% said HR is not a priority during rollouts.

Jen Phillips Kirkwood, an HR and AI governance expert and Executive Fellow at the World Economic Forum, says AI education for HR teams will have to advance beyond Claude, Gemini, or ChatGPT, which most HR professionals are already using regularly to perform basic tasks more easily.

“These moments are not what senior leaders envision when they talk about AI,” she wrote in the State of HR report. “Executives are looking for enterprise impact. They want faster hiring, scalable service, stronger workforce insights, and consistent experiences across roles and regions—outcomes that go beyond individual experimentation.”

Kirkwood says HR managers must be capable of collaborating as equals with IT, legal, leadership, and other departments.

“That shift requires a new type of professional development for HR teams,” she wrote. “Our work isn’t about becoming technologists, but about building the capability to steer technological decisions. We must be able to guide where AI exists, how it operates and how it should (and should not) be used in decisions that affect people.”

As she put it, “We have work to do.”

Most companies haven’t rolled out AI training for their HR teams yet. In your opinion, what’s the number one reason?



Source: HRCI LinkedIn survey June 26-29, 288 respondents

Does your organization spend enough on professional development for HR?



Source: HRCI LinkedIn survey June 30 to July 2, 751 respondents

Effective Learning for Tomorrow

Aligning professional development with critical needs is a function of acting intentionally and with care when designing learning programs, Dufrane says. While many managers allow employees the freedom to choose their own learning experiences (and employees often appreciate this freedom and flexibility), individual and organizational priorities may not always align. The solution is to proactively vet options to ensure they are relevant to your department's needs and challenges.

"Learning should be intentional," Dufrane said. "It should fit the immediate needs of your team and the strategic needs of your business. Companies that take a casual approach are missing a serious opportunity."

Here are several practical ways to build a stronger professional development strategy. Many of these approaches require more intentional planning than additional budget, making them accessible for organizations of all sizes.

→ **Identify needs, priorities, and outcomes.**

Professional development will be far less productive if your team is operating without a clear understanding of the purpose of their learning and—equally important—the needs most critical to the business. Another strong idea is to consider the outcomes you want. Training and learning can be tied directly to attaining important goals or solving specific problems. For example, based on its increasing ubiquity, AI policy and governance might be treated as a required HR team competency.

→ **Create a menu of learning options.** Cost is not synonymous with quality. Curate a menu of options in a range of formats, price levels, and time commitments, all centered on your priority needs and outcomes. Within that framework, you can offer employees choices, knowing all are aligned to your team and organizational goals.

The Case for Certification

One option for HR professionals and hiring managers who are serious about professional development is [HRCI certification](#).

HRCI certification is earned by meeting defined eligibility requirements in education and experience and passing a comprehensive exam. Some certifications, like the GPHR, SPHR, SPHRi, PHR, PHRi, and PHRca, validate professional-level HR performance; others, like the aPHR and aPHRi, are knowledge-based and designed for those earlier in their HR careers. Accredited certification is different from certificates offered by training providers and educational institutions, which simply confirm the completion of coursework.

HRCI offers eight certifications across three tiers—knowledge, operations, and strategy. Whether you are building a foundation in HR, validating operational expertise, or stepping into a leadership role that shapes organizational direction, certification signals that your knowledge and experience have been independently verified against recognized professional standards.

HR professionals working in compliance-heavy industries or locations may find certification especially beneficial, since it signals a formal understanding of employment law and workforce compliance.

The benefits of certification for HR professionals include:

→ **Compensation.** In HRCI's 2021 Value of Certification report, nearly half of HRCI-certified respondents (49%) observed annual salary growth in the 6–20% range after earning their credential.

- **Build individual learning plans.** [McKinsey research](#) found that the single most common reason employees leave is a lack of perceived career development and advancement, cited by 41% of those surveyed. “Organizations that don’t provide learning and development opportunities risk losing talent,” the report said. An individual development plan directly shows team members that their professional development—and by extension, their advancement—is taken seriously. The most effective plans also align learning with an employee’s long-term career goals, helping build the skills and experiences needed for future roles. Creating a development plan is a direct investment in both retention and engagement.
- **Embed learning inside work.** Deloitte’s 2025 [Global Human Capital Trends](#) report found that the most critical gap facing organizations is less about skills than it is about experience, with two-thirds of managers reporting that recent hires were not fully prepared. One answer is what Deloitte calls “upskilling in context,” building learning opportunities directly within the job rather than outside of it. The goal is relevant, real-world experiences with no gap between training and daily practice.
- **Increase feedback across channels.** [McKinsey’s HR Monitor 2026 report](#), which surveyed roughly 1,300 HR professionals and 5,500 employees across 10 countries, found that more than half of all employees receive feedback only once a year—or not at all. One way to augment learning is simply to increase feedback on a regular basis, both from managers and peers. Much can be learned by sharing ideas and perspectives.

Of course, there are many other things an organization can do to facilitate HR learning, from certification support to cross-generational mentorship programs. What’s important, Dufrane said, is to take a strategic approach.

“It is hard to overstate the importance of continuous learning,” Dufrane said. “Whether we are talking about individuals, teams, or entire organizations, we must continue to grow our capabilities as the workplace changes. Learning should be an ‘always on’ activity. It should be a priority at every organization.”

The Case for Certification (continued)

- **Promotion.** More than a third of those certified (36%) received one to two promotions after certification.
- **Career satisfaction.** 76% of certified professionals reported being satisfied or extremely satisfied with their progress toward long-term career goals, and 77% reported satisfaction with personal skill development.

The benefits of certification for organizations include:

- **Performance.** 67% of supervisors reported that certified team members exceed expectations for technical performance, compared to only 50% for non-certified staff.
- **Readiness.** 78% of supervisors reported that certified employees exceed expectations for handling emergencies or crises when compared to their non-certified peers.
- **Leadership.** 73% of supervisors reported that certified team members meet or exceed expectations in leadership skills, compared to 62% for non-certified staff.

“HRCI certification is the global standard in professional development for HR professionals,” Dufrane said. “We have issued more than 500,000 certifications, which benefit both individuals and organizations. It is popular because it is an effective mark of professional distinction.”

METHODOLOGY

Recent HRCI data was gathered via multiple LinkedIn surveys that ran between June 24 to July 2, 2026, and collectively represent 2,475 responses. HRCI's 2026 State of HR data was gathered from 4,583 human resources professionals between October 15 and 31, 2025. A large majority of those respondents (85%) practice HR in the United States.