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Protecting workforce competence for safer, healthier workplaces

RoSPA's OSH Skills Commission findings report

In partnership with





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Executive summary

The OSH Skills Commission makes the case for recognising whole workforce competence as a core organisational asset and a precondition for safer, healthier and more productive work.

Qualitative evidence was heard at five roundtable discussions involving industry leaders and practitioners from occupational safety and health (OSH), human resources (HR), occupational health (OH), and other associated specialists. Through the Commission's discussions and evidence gathering, several key priorities emerged, including the need to create the conditions where workers can gain meaningful early-career exposure, hone judgement through experience and shadowing, and continue learning throughout their working life. The provision or absence of these conditions carry stark consequences for OSH. Where competence and workforce capability are strong, organisations are better able to prevent harm, manage change, retain critical knowledge and translate workforce capability into operational safety, performance and resilience. Where they are weak, the consequences extend beyond safety incidents: skills gaps magnify workload, undermine organisational decision-making and weaken psychological safety, introducing avoidable risks, instability and productivity loss. Competence is central in supporting safe, healthy workplaces, fostering wellbeing, productivity, and stability.

The Commission recommends that organisations take greater responsibility for developing and sustaining competence, rather

than relying on a supply of workers who acquire it elsewhere and appear fully formed at point of hire. In practice, this means improving employer engagement with young people and early-career entrants, protecting time for learning throughout working life, strengthening mentoring frameworks, shadowing and knowledge transfer opportunities, and supporting internal workforce mobility based on what skills workers have rather than the qualifications they lack. It also means taking a more deliberate approach to succession planning, phased retirement and work design that fits around life course, so that critical knowledge is retained and transferred in safety-critical and technically complex roles. These are not peripheral issues. They are core organisational controls that influence whether workforce capability is maintained, work is carried out safely, and productivity gains are sustained.

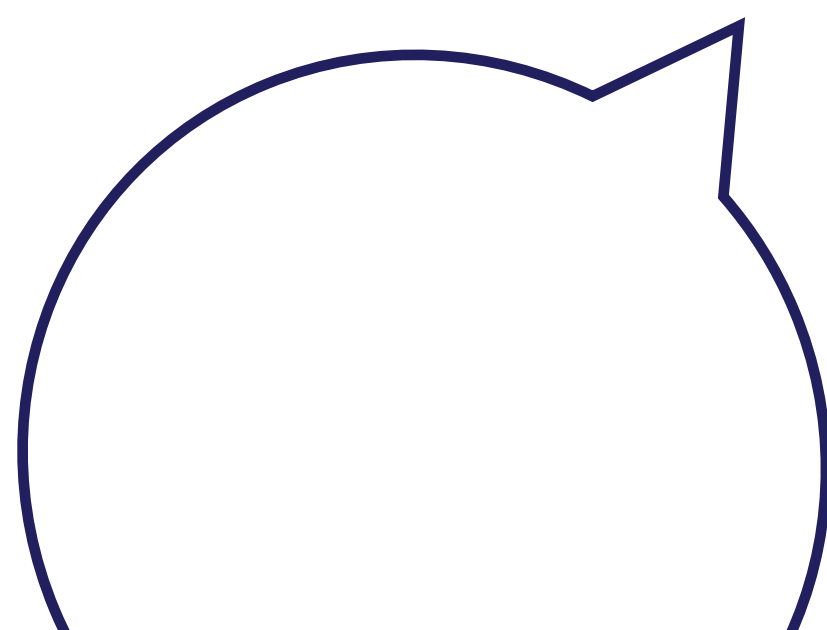
Our discussions also made clear that investing in competence is a national economic imperative. Competent workforces are more adaptable and better able to respond to change, qualities that are essential as the UK workforce faces growing pressure associated with technological and demographic shifts. Our recommendation for the introduction of a Skills Passport reflects this wider need: transferable skills should be recognised and recorded more effectively allowing for informed movement between roles and sectors whilst equipping employers to make better use of existing skills. Recording skills in this way also informs hiring decisions providing a common language between OSH, operations and HR. Stronger recognition of transferable skills, combined



with clearer role design, internal progression and better retention of tacit knowledge, would improve recruitment and support the development of competence in post.

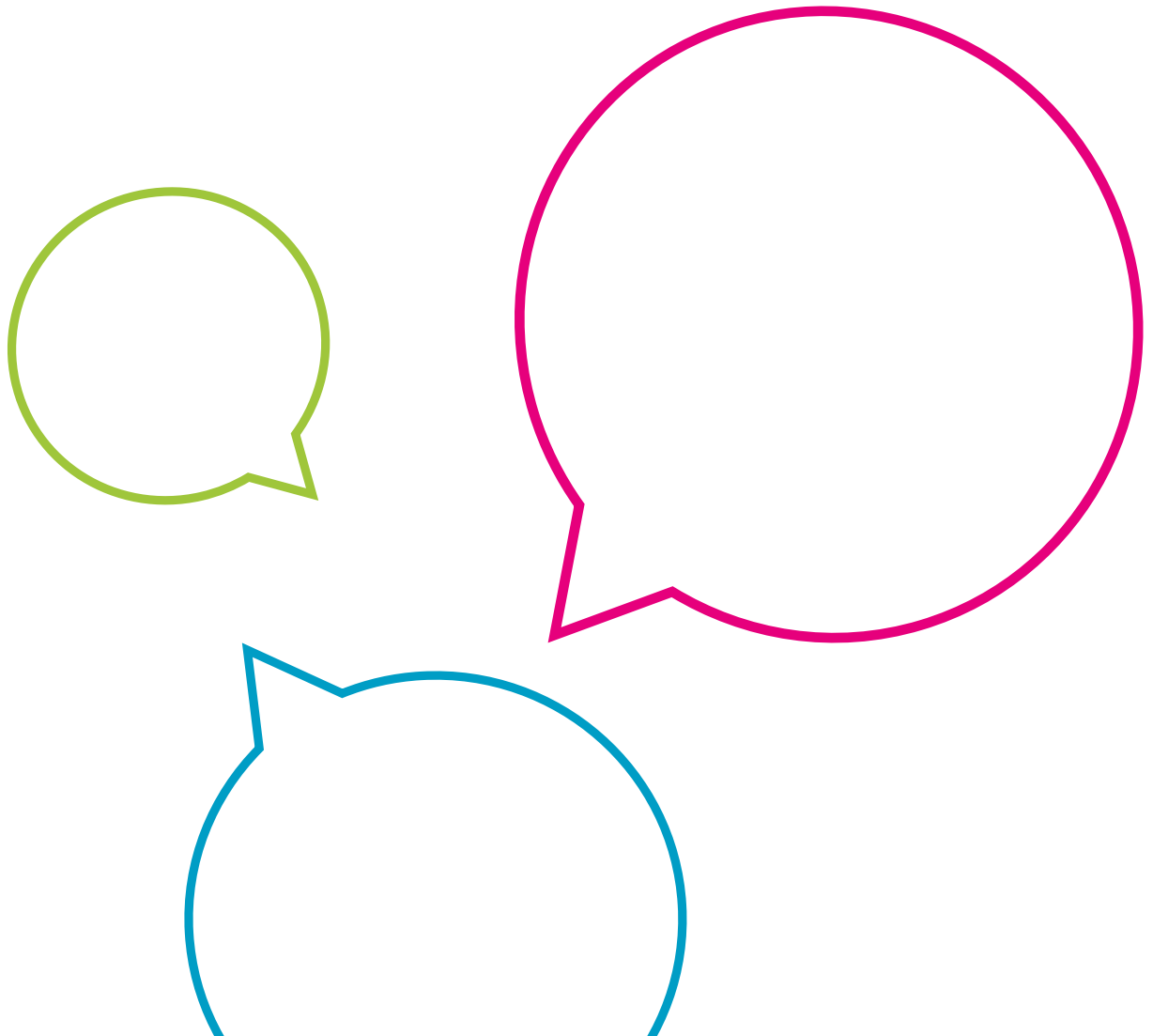
Hybrid working, automation and AI are reshaping how work is organised, how skills are developed, used and ultimately transferred. The Commission heard concern that, unless carefully governed, tech-facilitated changes can narrow access to work experience, weaken informal learning, create false confidence and erode interpersonal (communication) skills. To ensure new technologies are adopted safely, ethically and transparently our recommendation calls for a role-appropriate AI 'driving-licence', meaningful consultation on digital change, stronger organisational governance, human-in-the-loop checks, and an explicit address for the impact of AI on workforce development on organisational risk registers. Technologically driven changes to work should strengthen workforce capability, by deliberate recognition and management of risks they pose to competence development, and by augmenting skills of human workers not displacing them.

Leaders who act on these recommendations will be better placed to improve trust and retain competent workers, sustain productivity and resilience, and reduce strain on their OSH management systems, building the workforce capability on which health, safety and sustainable growth depend. The Commission's targeted recommendations that follow provide practical actions for organisational leaders, OSH professionals and government.



Summary of findings

1. Current skills systems place too much weight on qualifications and not enough on experience. Leaders should support policies that protect and expand access to high-quality early-career exposure through apprenticeships, structured work experience, and employer engagement so that people can develop the judgement and practical capability required for safe and effective work
2. Skills cannot be left to individuals alone. Leaders should drive a shift towards employer-led competence development embedding learning into work, protecting time for development, improving training quality, and strengthening managerial capability so that organisations actively build and sustain the skills they depend on
3. Rapid changes in technology and ways of working are reshaping how skills are developed and maintained. Leaders should ensure that skills policy supports lifelong learning, preserves informal and experiential learning, and promotes the safe and effective adoption of technology so that innovation strengthens workforce competence.



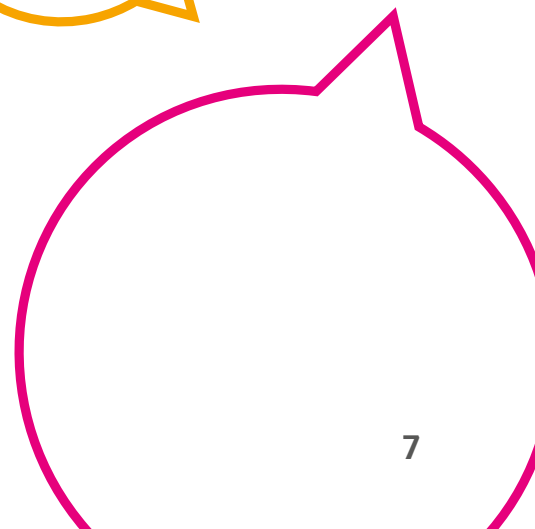
Headline recommendations

For organisation leaders and OSH professionals

- Offer in-person work experience placements and use the Careers and Enterprise Company's Employer Standards to improve engagement with young people and those in early-careers raising realistic expectations of work and awareness of good work design
- Adopt ISO 45003 Psychological Health and Safety Management and ring-fence resources for competence development by proactive collaboration between OSH, OH, HR, and operational functions. Provide Executive level staff who are ultimately responsible with visibility of OSH and HR outcomes
- Introduce succession planning and phased retirement pathways & policies: succession planning, phased retirement and proactive internal workforce mobility focussed on skills workers have rather than qualifications they lack.

For government & Skills England

- Create a sector agnostic Skills Passport based around the new UK Standard Skills Classification¹ and the Essential Skills Taskforce's 'Skills Builder Universal Framework'² to support recording and communication of transferable skills and recognise the value of lifelong learning
- Introduce a "driving licence for AI" and role appropriate levels of AI competence based on The Alan Turing Institute's 'AI Skills for Business Competency'³.



¹ [The UK Standard Skills Classification - GOV.UK](#)

² [Skills Builder UK](#)

³ [AI Skills for Business Competency Framework | The Alan Turing Institute](#)

Introduction

RoSPA established the Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) Skills Commission after several converging discussions with industry and OSH leaders exposed a growing challenge to OSH: wider workforce competence.

Competent people and capable workforces remain fundamental to strong OSH outcomes, and this need cannot be entirely engineered away. Dynamic, modern work environments demand appropriate skills, experience, knowledge, training and judgement honed through practice, to support safe, adaptable and productive work in the long-term. Protecting workforce competence is therefore foundational to organisational growth, central to both preventing harm and enabling people to thrive at work.

At a national level, the Keep Britain Working Review⁴ has sharpened Government focus on the broader consequences of failing to keep people safe and healthy in work. These costs can be imagined like an iceberg, spanning both those visible, measurable impacts like stalled productivity and increased pressure on public support systems; and less visible, less measurable including the erosion of skills, competence, and lost potential. Government action, including through the Employment Rights Bill, signals growing recognition of this challenge. The skills agenda should now be treated with similar urgency, with equal attention given to the barriers that prevent competence from being developed and sustained.

But many employers are finding it harder to recruit, retain, and develop people with the

skills they need. Technical and non-technical shortages, weak knowledge transfer, and high turnover are placing increasing strain on OSH management systems. This strain is becoming more acute as hybrid working, automation, artificial intelligence (AI), demographic change, and shifting workforce expectations reshape how people approach and experience work.

Skills also matter beyond the workplace. Where they are weak or underdeveloped, people are less likely to access good work, maintain their health and wellbeing, or influence the conditions that shape their working lives.

The growing number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) underscores why this work is so important now. Behind the headline figures lies a deeper challenge: too many people are missing opportunities to develop the skills, experience and confidence that underpin long-term competence and participation in work. As employers face persistent recruitment and retention difficulties, and as economic inactivity remains a national concern, strengthening pathways into work and supporting skills development throughout working life has become increasingly urgent. Skills and competence are not peripheral to these challenges; they are integral to them. Addressing the conditions that enable people to build, apply and sustain competence must therefore form a central part of any response to the UK's workforce and economic inactivity challenges.

Whilst there is broad agreement that skills matter, there is less clarity about how they are developed and sustained, and where responsibility sits. This report takes a wider

view across education, employment, and learning culture. It argues that competence does not arise from education and training alone, but from whether organisations create the conditions in which skills can be applied, strengthened, and transferred through work itself. Competence must therefore be understood not as a fixed personal attribute, but as something shaped by leadership, work design, learning culture, and access to experience over time.

The OSH Skills Commission examines the UK's competence challenge from this systems perspective. In partnership with Speedy Hire, RoSPA convened five roundtables in spring 2026 to explore the issue in depth. Chaired by Commissioners with relevant expertise, the roundtables brought together employers, practitioners, and subject-matter experts to test assumptions, share operational insight, and develop practical recommendations. This report sets out the national and organisational conditions shaping workforce capability and identifies the changes needed to support safer, healthier, and more resilient workplaces.

When people have the knowledge, skills, experience and judgement to work safely and effectively, they are better equipped to identify hazards, manage risks and prevent harm. Strengthening workforce competence is therefore not only a workforce and productivity issue, but a critical component of accident prevention and the creation of safer, healthier workplaces

Method

The OSH Skills Commission convened five in-person roundtables in February and March 2026. The roundtables were organised around five themes: recruitment; retention; consultation and worker representation; wellbeing and psychological safety; and technology in OSH. This structure enabled the Commission to compare experience across sectors, identify common pressures, and explore where policy and practice may need to change.

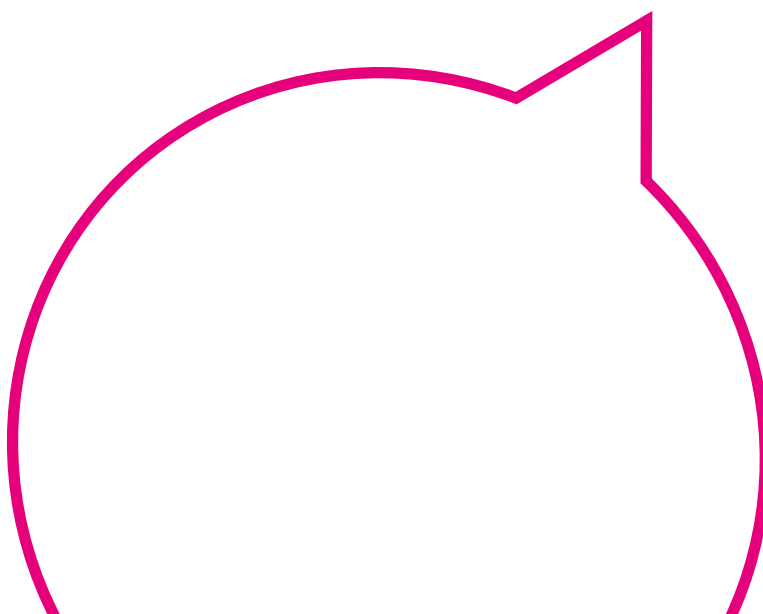
Each day-long session was chaired by a Commissioner selected for their depth and relevance of expertise across a specific topic. Participants included employers, practitioners, and subject-matter experts invited to test assumptions, share experience, and help RoSPA identify practical responses to emerging skills pressures.

RoSPA would like to extend heartfelt thanks to every participant who gave their time and expertise, and made these roundtable discussions both valuable and enjoyable.

This report draws on those discussions to identify the principal drivers of current and emerging skills pressures and to develop recommendations for employers, industry leaders, and Government. It is not intended as a comprehensive labour market study, but as an evidence-informed account of the practical challenges and opportunities identified through the Commission's engagement.

The findings are considered through several connected angles, including:

- Skills availability and supply
- Recruitment and retention of competent people
- Consultation and worker voice
- Wellbeing and the organisational conditions that shape capability over time
- The responsible adoption of technology.



The Commissioners

Baroness Christine Crawley, Vice President, RoSPA

As a distinguished member of the House of Lords, Baroness Christine Crawley of Edgbaston brings invaluable political experience and insight to RoSPA's Presidential Team. Her political career began in local government and led to 15 years as Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for Birmingham East, where she was instrumental in advancing the European Maternity Leave Directive, for British women, among other achievements. Since becoming a Labour life peer in 1998, Baroness Crawley has strengthened her commitment to improving people's lives by focusing on social justice, workplace rights and consumer protection. Baroness Crawley has made important contributions to debates on the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill and Retained EU Law Bill, both of which aim to uphold strong protections and safety standards for UK consumers.



Andy Johnson, Group HSSEQ Director, Speedy Hire

Andy has over twenty years of extensive experience in the UK, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman, with senior HSE roles within logistics, equipment rental, construction, and oil and gas. In 2024 Speedy Hire were awarded the RoSPA President's Award for 10 consecutive Gold Awards, reinforcing their dedication to the safety and health agenda over many years.



Becky Hickman, Chief Executive Officer, RoSPA

Becky's visionary leadership extends to societal impact, evidenced by initiatives like the Brighter Beginnings Appeal, aiding vulnerable families, and her strategic collaborations with industry giants such as Speedy Hire, L'Oréal and Nike which have secured RoSPA's global influence in health and safety excellence. She was also at the helm of RoSPA's sector-leading response to the recent Retained EU Law Bill. As CEO, Becky steers RoSPA towards its vision, placing sustainability and member-centricity at the forefront. With her unwavering commitment to safety and innovation, Becky charts a bold course, laying the foundations for future growth to stand RoSPA in good stead for years to come.



Nick Pahl, Chief Executive Officer, Society of Occupational Medicine

Nick has held senior posts in the NHS, Hospice UK and Marie Stopes International. He has completed a Windsor Leadership Trust and ACEVO next generation CEO training, a diploma in management, a degree in Economics and an MSc in Public Health from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He has been a Trustee of THET and Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and is currently Trustee of the British Geriatrics Society. Nick is the Chair of RoSPA's National Occupational Health and Safety Committee. Last year Nick received honorary membership of the Faculty of Public Health. He currently judges for CIPD and MemCom workplace health awards.



Kate Field, Global Head Human and Social Sustainability, BSI

Kate is an award-winning thought leader, author, and globally recognised expert in health, safety, and well-being. With over 20 years of experience, she drives BSI's global strategy on human and social sustainability, fostering safer, healthier, and fairer workplaces. A sought-after keynote speaker and Independent Board Member for the Global Initiative for Industrial Safety, Kate champions cultural transformation, addressing critical topics like AI, modern slavery, and work impacts of climate change to inspire purpose-driven, human-centric innovation. Kate also pioneered ISO 45003 training on psychological health and safety and authored BSI's Prioritizing People Model, a workplace wellbeing framework that has reached 8,000 organisations across 119 countries.

**Luke Collins, National Health and Safety Officer, Unite the Union**

Luke is responsible for supporting the manufacturing, steel, aerospace/shipbuilding, foundry and automotive sectors amongst others. Luke has served as a Unite health and safety representative for several years before entering OSH management as a professional.

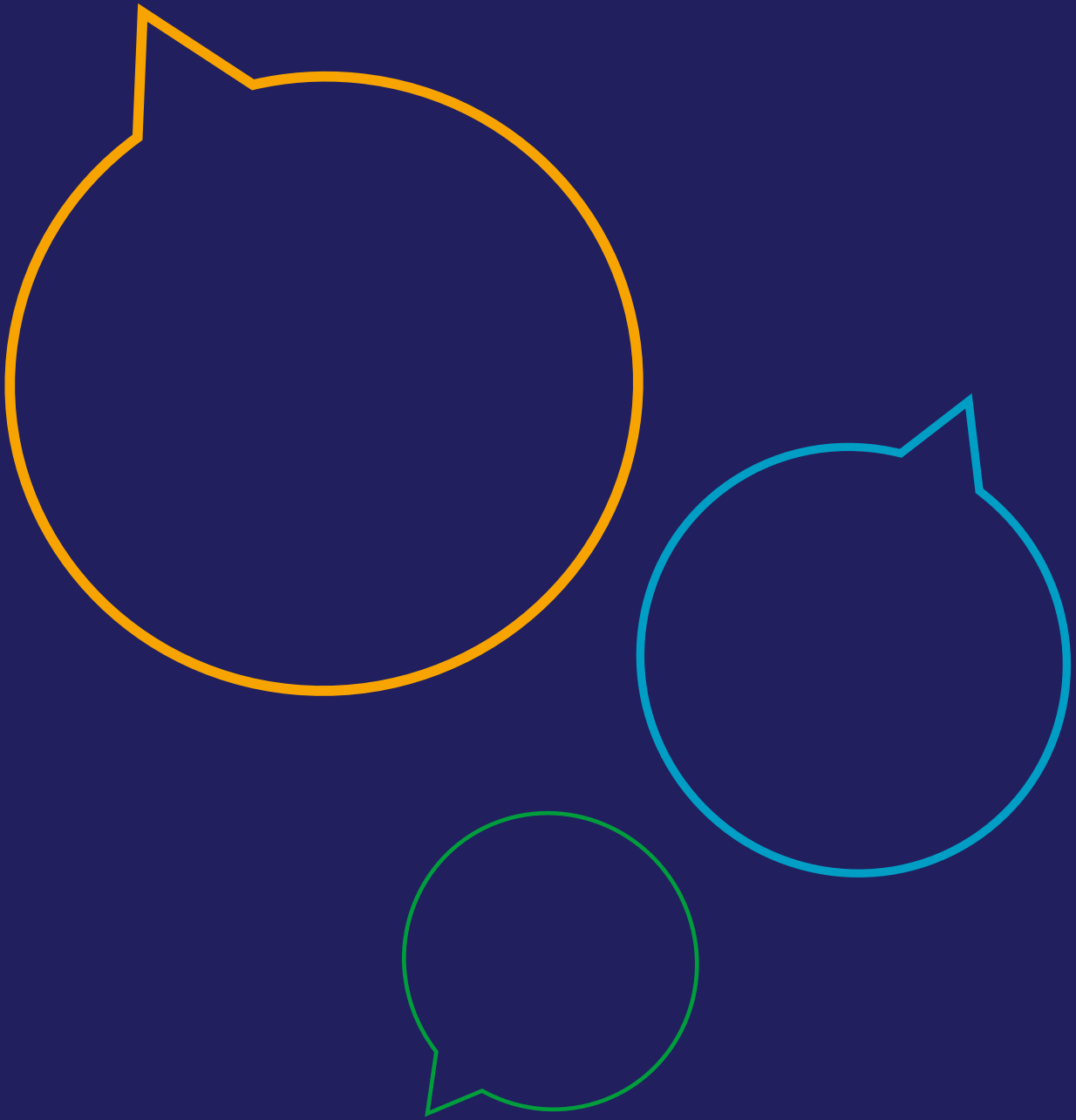
**Claudia Jaksch, Chief Executive Officer, Policy Connect**

Claudia is a seasoned policy expert with longstanding experience in stakeholder engagement, policy analysis, policy development and achieving policy impact in the UK and at an international level. Claudia holds an MBA from Warwick Business School, a Masters degree in International Political Economy from King's College London and a Bachelor's degree in European Studies from the University of Passau, Germany. Claudia is a board member of the charity Carbon Copy and supports the organisation's work on public engagement and local action to tackle the climate crisis as a trustee.

**Richard Bate, President, IOSH**

Richard began his career as a paramedic in the UK Health Service, where he gained valuable experience in emergency response, helicopter aircrew operations, management and training. A passionate promoter of diversity, equity, and socially sustainable approaches to safety, as President-Elect of IOSH and throughout his career, Richard has contributed significantly to global efforts on harm prevention, safety leadership, and policy development.





Chapter one

Job-readiness & early-careers learning

Measuring skill through experience and credentials

Strategic intent: Strengthen job readiness by aligning recruitment, learning, and early-career development with the realities of work, broadening assessment beyond qualifications to encompass experience, judgement, and potential, and protecting the mentoring, shadowing, and informal learning through which competence is built.

Experience gap and barriers to job readiness

Many early-career entrants are expected to be “job-ready” without protection of the necessary work experience and early career exposure through which judgement and awareness are developed, with hybrid working and automation further narrowing these routes into competence.

A widening experience gap is undermining job readiness, particularly for young people, graduates, apprentices, and early-career workers. Employers often expect candidates to arrive already capable of immediate contribution, whilst simultaneously offering ever more limited access to the work experience upstream that develops job-readiness in practice. Work experience, shadowing, and structured exposure to real work are increasingly scarce, especially in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) with limited capacity.

In the recent interim report for the Milburn Review (May 2026)⁵ less than half of 18 to 24-year-olds reported feeling ready for work when they left education. Graduates and apprentices frequently find that formal education alone has not equipped them for workplace norms, pace, responsibility, or decision-making in live environments. Employers may also assume that broader skills such as time management, emotional intelligence, and communication by phone, in writing, and face to face are developed alongside formal study, but wider social changes mean this cannot be taken for granted. Shortened induction and onboarding can further obscure any skills gaps not picked up during interview.

These pressures are intensified where hybrid or remote working reduces day-to-day exposure to experienced colleagues. Young and inexperienced workers may face especially high cognitive and emotional loads, while remote and hybrid arrangements can obscure signs of overload and distress. Opportunities to observe professional behaviours, develop judgement, and build hazard perception through everyday interaction have diminished. For many new starters, the chance to “learn by osmosis” has gone, even though these informal processes remain central to competence development. At the same time, automation and AI may reduce entry-level tasks that once helped

⁵ [Young people and work: interim report - GOV.UK](#)

young people, graduates, apprentices, and early-career workers build foundational experience, making it harder to secure workers with the foundation of practical skills that competence later depends upon.

These are structural barriers rather than individual failings. They fuel a system in which organisations demand job-ready candidates while overseeing the erosion of conditions that produce them. Closing the experience gap will therefore require coordinated action across employers, education providers, and policymakers.

Aligning apprenticeships (and other post-16 study) with real work

Apprenticeships and other post-16 routes should be more adaptable and closely aligned to the skills requirements of work, so they can build the practical foundation for competence employers need.

Our discussions highlighted a persistent mismatch between apprenticeship design and the realities of modern work. Although these routes are intended to provide high-quality, work-based entry into skilled employment, many programmes still rely on outdated role profiles and standards that no longer reflect current technologies, tasks, or ways of working. As a result, apprentices may complete training that lags behind skills required in practice. The job-readiness gap may grow further if post-16 study routes lose mandatory work-experience elements for reasons discussed in the previous section.

Skills England themselves recognise⁶ that SMEs face particular challenges in delivering apprenticeships due to their limited capacity for administrative requirements, making it difficult to commit to longer programmes and introducing further bias to the types of learning accessible via post-16 study.

During our discussions there were also concerns raised that some study programmes are shaped more to leverage access to levy funding than by genuine sector workforce need. This can damage the reputation of the Growth & Skills Levy, direct investment away from areas where it is strategically necessary and allow real skills shortages to escalate. Discussion participants were clear that strong programmes should be regularly reviewed to ensure they remain relevant, of a high-quality, and judged on whether apprentices can perform safely and effectively in real roles, not simply by attainment rates or by the completion of requisite paperwork.

Assessment practices are suspected to deepen misalignment. Learning objectives and course outcomes which are not tailored to specific role clusters or assessed by people with clear insight of what competent performance looks like in practice. Standardised criteria can miss important nuance in judgement, confidence, and contextual understanding. Ring-fencing time and improving financial support for experienced workers to step away from operational duties to teach and coach apprentices and post-16 students would strengthen learning and improve outcomes.

Underlying these issues is a wider disconnect between employers, education providers, and the skills system. Centralised funding models and slow curriculum change limit responsiveness to evolving workplace needs, especially where technology and work design are changing quickly. Taken together, these factors mean apprenticeships (and similar post-16 study) can signal competence without reliably building it, weakening confidence in the system for both learners and employers.

⁶ [Skills England Sector evidence on the growth and skills offer](#)

Qualified vs competent

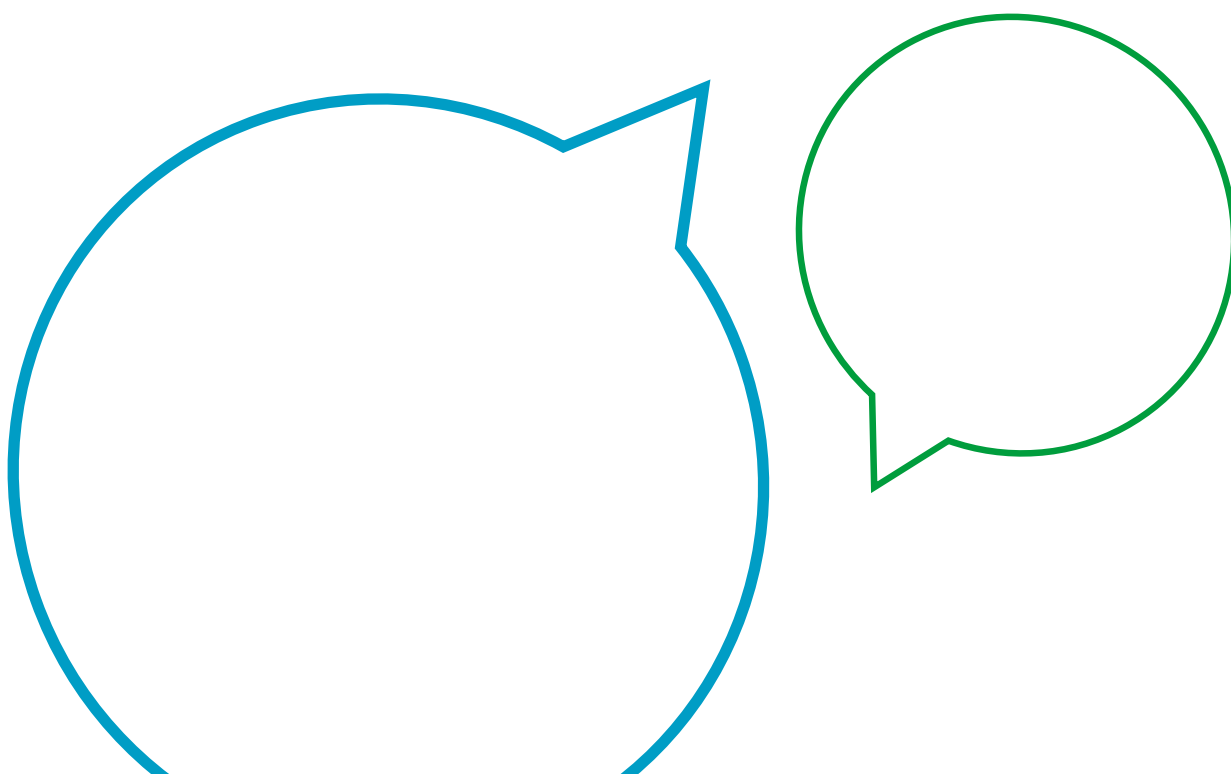
Competence should be assessed and developed through a broader view of capability that values experience-based judgement, attitude, behaviours, and values alongside formal qualifications, strengthening risk control and supporting safe, effective performance.

Across our discussions on recruitment and workforce development, it was agreed that organisations often use qualifications and credentials as a proxy for competence. However, in a rapidly changing world of work, these qualifications can quickly become outdated or misaligned with how roles are actually performed introducing skills gaps and undermining the intended control.

Our discussions repeatedly pointed to capability as the missing middle layer. Workforce capability goes beyond technical skill of individuals to include collective experience, contextual understanding, and ability to exercise skill within its safe limits in dynamic environments. There is a role for OSH management in facilitating the development of capability by sharing lessons learned, tacit knowledge, and role- and site-specific experience; it is also fostered through shadowing, coaching, and informal learning, much of which remains inconsistently measured, its value overlooked. An organisational over-reliance on outsourced labour for example, using contractors or temporary workers can drain the workforce capability when consistently favoured over upskilling of internal staff.

Many employers, who have reduced headcount now lack the capacity to provide structured mentoring, shadowing, and other exposure to develop workforce capability. As a result, opportunities for informal learning and shared experience (both central to competence development) are lost without ever being recognised as adding value.

Taken together, the discussions emphasise a need to rebalance how organisations assess and develop individual competence: away from an administratively convenient focus on qualifications and credentials, and towards broader assessments of competence and those attributes and activities which foster wider workforce capability.





Chapter two

Flexibility, life course fit & workforce sustainability

Designing work around human needs across a working lifetime

Strategic intent: Design work and working patterns around human needs across the life course so that organisations protect wellbeing, strengthen belonging and psychological safety, retain critical knowledge, and sustain workforce competence, health, and productivity.

Flexibility and life course fit of work

Retention is not only shaped by pay, location, or conditions, but by how well work can flex around changing life course needs such as health, caring responsibilities, and later-career transitions.

Flexibility, life course fit, and retention are closely connected. Our discussions suggested that retention of competent people suffers when flexibility is promised in policy but not enabled in practice. Poorly designed hybrid arrangements, rigid hours, and abrupt return-to-office mandates without clear justification can undermine trust and create avoidable retention problems.

Retention improves when work systems are designed realistically around people's lives. Roles that reflect life stage, health needs, caring responsibilities, and human capacity are more likely to sustain long-term engagement. Examples include school-hours roles, shift patterns with proper recovery time, and flexibility for workers managing caring responsibilities or fluctuating health. Predictable life-course events, such as menopause, are often poorly supported, yet, when managed well, can be opportunities for building loyalty and trust between employer and employee, at relatively low cost. Anecdotally, our participants explained that when a policy offering additional paid leave for menopause-related symptoms was introduced, not only was it underutilised by eligible employees, but it generated loyalty and goodwill that outweighed the organisational cost.

Participants in our discussions also explored and strongly supported the view that flexibility and life-course fit extend beyond home working. They include flexible hours, adapted role and task design, and policies that line managers can apply with empathy rather than blanket rules.

There is certainly a balance to be struck. As discussed in Chapter 1 hybrid and remote working can weaken the development opportunities for early-career workers, while overly rigid office mandates can repel workers with caring responsibilities or those approaching retirement. Retaining competent workers relies increasingly on having empathy for life course needs, discussing flexibility which can reasonably be made available with input from operational, OSH, HR and occupational health professionals. Thoughtless or unconsulted change, generic training, and excessive bureaucracy can frustrate experienced staff and drive them away, compounding the very safety and productivity risks organisations are trying to manage.

Leaders must make transparent decisions which balance the organisational needs with those of people working there and varying life course needs. The Healthy Working Lifecycle⁷, which emerged recently from the Keep Britain Working Review provides a great starting point.

Skills gaps, workload, and the impact on wellbeing

To prevent skills gaps and heavy workloads from reinforcing one another and increasing the risk of stress, fatigue, and psychological harm, organisations should protect time for learning so that workforce capability, wellbeing, and safety can be mutually reinforced.

Skills gaps, workload pressure, and wellbeing should not be treated as separate issues. They form a reinforcing cycle: skill shortages and capability gaps increase workload; excessive workload reduces time for learning, supervision, and recovery; and the resulting fatigue and strain make competence harder to build and sustain. In this way, organisations can become locked into a pattern in which pressure weakens capability, and weakened capability invites more risk.

The burden often falls most heavily on experienced workers, who are expected to maintain their output while also mentoring, supervising, and absorbing residual risk from less experienced colleagues. Mentoring, peer learning, shadowing, and “watch-do-teach” approaches remain some of the most effective ways to build confidence and practical judgement, but they require time and add labour. Without organisational support and protected time for experienced workers to teach and coach, these development routes are either deprioritised or exert unsustainable demand on valuable experts increasing stress, fatigue, and the likelihood of burnout.

Our discussions therefore pointed to a clear conclusion: skills gaps must be recognised not only as a workforce capability issue, but as a wellbeing risk. Realistic workloads, protected time for learning, and earlier recognition of stress linked to competence shortfalls are essential. Without deliberate action, organisations may knowingly or unknowingly trade short-term productivity gains for long-term capability loss and declining OSH performance.

Informal learning and tacit knowledge loss

Hybrid and remote work should be designed to preserve informal learning, tacit knowledge transfer, and the everyday exposure through which judgement and competence continue to develop.

Hybrid and remote working have reduced opportunities for the informal learning that would traditionally occur through observation, shared problem-solving, and everyday contact with experienced colleagues. This matters especially for early-career workers, who often build judgement, hazard perception, and practical capability through these interactions. Formal training can support this development, but it cannot fully replace the contextual understanding gained through learning by proximity to experienced colleagues.

As organisations rarely record informal learning, its loss is easy to miss. Training records may appear stable while the everyday opportunities through which tacit knowledge is shared steadily decline. This may help explain why organisations now report downturn in social skills, and job-readiness between workers who entered before and after the sudden uptick in hybrid working associated with the pandemic, even where formal training activity appears consistent.

⁷ [Keep Britain Working: Final report - GOV.UK](#)

A growing emphasis on what can be easily measured risks understating the competence of long-serving workers and narrowing decisions about recruitment, promotion, flexibility, and retirement. In practice, this reinforces a compliance-driven view of competence and further diminishes the value and so protection of informal learning.

The “doorman fallacy”, popularised by Rory Sutherland, helps explain this dynamic. It describes the pursuit of narrow economic efficiency that defines a person’s role too tightly and, in doing so, destroys wider forms of value. Sutherland’s example is the luxury hotel doorman: if their role is defined only as opening and closing doors, replacing them with an automatic door appears rational. But that logic ignores the wider value they provide, including security, deterrence, hospitality, status signalling, and a personalised customer experience.

The same fallacy applies when organisations remove informal learning, upskilling opportunities, mentoring, or protected development time in the name of productivity. The short-term gains may look efficient, but the longer-term effect is capability loss. When organisations fail to recognise the value of human development and invest only in what is immediately measurable, they harm worker loyalty, reputation and their attractiveness to recruits. Competent workers may then leave, taking their tacit knowledge with them, and a damaged reputation may struggle to attract and retain the skilled people the organisation needs.

Without deliberate action like recognition for informal learning activity, organisational permission, and leadership support, organisations risk losing tacit knowledge, hollowing out workforce capability, and weakening OSH controls, even while formal training activity continues to be recorded.

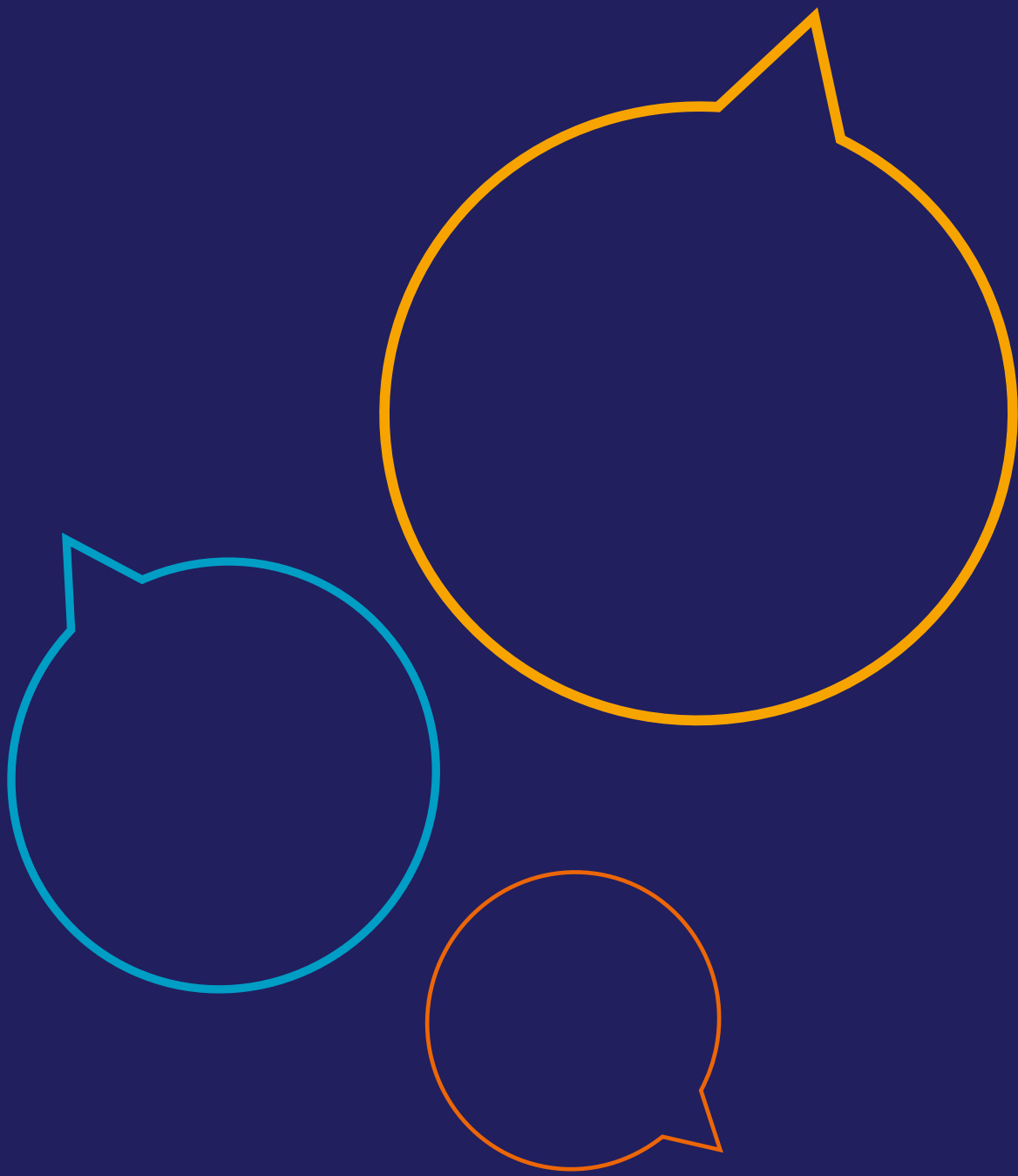
Succession planning & phased retirement

Succession planning is essential to preserving organisational competence, values, and tacit knowledge, especially in safety-critical and technically complex roles.

Succession planning and phased retirement present a huge opportunity, particularly in safety-critical and technically complex roles. In these settings, retention is not simply about maintaining headcount; it is about preserving tacit knowledge, professional competence, and context-specific understanding built through experience. When workers leave these roles without structured handover, organisations can lose capability which is difficult or impossible to replace and these shortcomings may not become visible until safety, engineering, or productivity failures occur.

Our discussions suggested that SMEs are less likely to approach succession planning formally, partly because they tend to operate more reactively and make less use of long-term skills mapping, forecasting, or continuity planning. In this context, phased retirement can be a valuable way to support internal mobility and promotion from within. Giving existing workers with the right skills visibility of the competence and responsibilities of colleagues approaching retirement can help identify their suitability, plan any necessary training or qualifications, and, where a direct successor is unavailable, develop a clear and accurate job description and person specification for recruitment.

In smaller or less complex organisations, it may be more feasible to redistribute responsibilities when a worker leaves than to recruit a direct replacement. Regardless of organisational size, succession planning and phased retirement offer an opportunity to preserve tacit knowledge and make transition more stable and manageable, reducing the risk of negative OSH impacts.



Chapter three

Leadership, management & trust

People management and consultation as critical safety and retention functions

Strategic intent: Strengthen managerial capability and embed meaningful, timely consultation as core organisational controls for better visibility and trust, informed decision-making, and a more resilient workforce.

Manager competence as a systemic risk

Line Manager capability is a critical organisational control: when it is weak, consultation, learning, appraisal, trust, retention, and safety performance all suffer.

A manager's 'human performance' competence emerged throughout the discussions not as an isolated skills issue, but as a systemic organisational risk affecting safety, competence development, worker wellbeing, workforce sustainability, and the quality of executive decision-making. How managers recruit, appraise, and support development of their direct reports shapes whether necessary workforce capability is developed and maintained in practice.

Managers are increasingly expected to act as a key control point for workforce competence and organisational learning. They are relied on to support upskilling and informal learning especially during periods of change. Yet organisations often fail to protect time for these activities or build capability in effective people management. As a result, both learning and engagement can morph into superficial tick-box exercises. Policies may still exist, but outcomes depend heavily on managerial capability for effective implementation.

Many managers also lack the skills or support to consult workers meaningfully, reducing consultation to a compliance exercise rather than a process that informs decisions, surfaces risk, and strengthens buy-in and implementation.

When used well, appraisal enables managers to understand workers' motivations, strengths, and development goals, and can support retention by making people feel seen, heard, and supported. In some roles this may be little more than a conversation between manager and worker; in others, particularly where progression into leadership is in view, a more formal process may be needed. The key is not uniformity, but the managerial competence (and time) to tailor the appraisal well.

These system weaknesses are often reinforced by recruitment and promotion practices. Promoting people into line management based on technical expertise alone can create avoidable productivity, health and safety risks. People management requires a different skill set, and although technical

and managerial strengths can combine to make an effective leader, one does not substitute for the other. Organisations therefore need to assess people's readiness to manage others as carefully as they assess technical competence for technical roles. When line management is weak, it can drive retention issues, capability loss, lowering productivity and worsening OSH outcomes, in particular psychosocial risks.

Our discussions highlighted that line manager capability has the potential to act as a risk multiplier, triggering a domino effect on the workers around them. When assumed or underdeveloped, it devalues consultation, harms retention, accelerates skills loss, ultimately undermining safety controls. Strengthening line management capability is therefore not a leadership "nice to have", but a core control essential to long-term organisational resilience.

Trust, fairness, and humane judgement

Policies alone do not retain skilled people; trust, fairness, and humane judgement are decisive factors in worker engagement, loyalty, and sustaining long-term capability.

Across our discussions, trust, fairness, and humane judgement emerged not as "soft" issues, but as foundational conditions for retaining skills, supporting strong OSH outcomes, and sustaining the long-term development of workforce capability. This aligns with recent Lloyd's Register Foundation research⁸, which revealed the reinforcing effect of leadership practices on OSH outcomes.

Trust is strengthened by organisational transparency: when policies are clear and applied consistently, there are clear routes on progression, and fair recognition of experience gained through both formal and informal routes. If policy or promise is disconnected from the lived reality of work, trust and confidence weakens, harming retention.

Fairness is baked into how organisational systems are designed and used. An over-reliance on qualifications, inflexible and non-inclusive development frameworks, and opaque AI-driven tools can all signal bias and unfairness. By contrast, enabling health-related adjustments and flexibility around caring responsibilities are practical expressions of fairness and organisational maturity. When flexibility is inequitably distributed, workers are likely to recognise unfairness, with consequences for their engagement and loyalty.

The importance of humane judgement was repeatedly contrasted with the use of heavy-handed policy and automated decision-making grounded in dated assumptions. Policies and metrics have a role to support systems development but should be periodically examined to ensure continued relevance and alignment to values of the organisation. Workers place greatest value on managers who exercise kindness, trust, and context-sensitive judgement. These qualities help retain skilled people and support better decisions in practice.

Meaningful consultation connects all three themes. Change imposed without early engagement damages trust, bakes in bias and unfairness, and excludes the human insight needed to shape workable, palatable decisions. Effective consultation, covered in the next section, helps organisations to avoid these risks and ensure that change happens with workers rather than to them.

⁸ [The role of leadership and governance in occupational safety and health | Lloyd's Register Foundation](#)

Organisations that prioritise transparency, fairness, ethical decision-making, and human-centred judgement are better placed to sustain capability, safety and productivity, working with their workforce not against them.

Consultation as a capability safeguard

Early, meaningful consultation helps avoid creation of skills gaps, poor system design, and reduces resistance to change. When workers and OSH professionals are consulted too late, risks are designed in, costly controls are needed, and the expected benefits of change are harder to realise.

Consultation plays a critical role in safeguarding organisational capability through change. When it is well-managed and occurs early and meaningfully in the planning of change, it helps unpick complex systems to surface hidden risks, and shape endpoints that make better use of existing competence, capacity and tacit knowledge. The result is changes that are more workable, trusted, and beneficial in practice.

The need for proactive consultation is heightened by digitalisation, AI, and hybrid working. These changes are often less visible, more centrally driven, and can be introduced with limited transparency, making emerging risks harder for workers to recognise and challenge. In periods of such technological change, consultation supports a “just transition” by helping organisations identify emerging skills gaps, transferable skills, and redeployment opportunities, making reskilling more planned and less reactive. In this way, well-managed consultation reduces resistance to change, improves retention, and increases acceptance of new ways of working.

By contrast, badly managed or late consultation is a significant contributor to skills gaps and poor system design, both of which can cost productivity and harm OSH control. Complex systems are rarely fully understood from a single vantage point, so excluding workers removes vital operational insight and weakens the resulting design. Change imposed without consultation can hard-wire risk into systems and processes. Where consultation is tokenistic or takes place only after decisions have been made, workers are left choosing between predetermined and often unpalatable options. This one-way conversation weakens trust, fosters resistance to change, and can increase the likelihood that workers and capability will be lost during the changes.

Effective consultation must happen early: explain clearly why change is planned, consider the insight offered from all stakeholders, and include opportunities to pause the process to reflect on its impacts and trajectory. Face-to-face engagement remains important for surfacing practical insights, and tapping into body language, ‘gut-feel’ and instinctive concerns that are often difficult to capture or missed entirely via digital channels alone.

The consensus of our discussion was clear: consultation is not a one-way communication step at the end of change; it is a practical safeguard for capability, safety, and system quality. Effective consultation is not optional or purely administrative. And change must happen with workers, not to them.



Chapter four

Honest work design & role clarity

Advertising and providing work which fosters competence, belonging and purpose

Strategic intent: Design work and roles more openly aligning job adverts, descriptions, expectations, and progression pathways with the realities of work, so that organisations strengthen legitimate attraction, support development, improve retention, and sustain safer, more capable teams.

Expectation vs reality of work

Strengthen attraction, recruitment, and retention by describing work honestly and in alignment with how it is experienced in practice.

Across our discussions, participants described a persistent gap between how work is advertised and how it is actually experienced.

Roles are often advertised as exciting, flexible, and aspirational, while the lived reality may be more mundane, constrained, and demanding. When roles are oversold in adverts, at interview or point of hire, recruits can quickly lose enthusiasm for the role as they realise the reality potentially resulting in them giving notice. This harms retention, reopens gaps in workforce capability and weakens the return on investment from recruitment and initial training. In some cases, recruits may have even been drawn away from roles better suited to their skills, compounding both organisational churn and wider sector or national skills shortages.

This is not to say the gap between advertised and actual role is intentional- job descriptions and fragmented recruitment processes often reinforce the mismatch. Many job descriptions are outdated, overly generic, or focused on qualifications rather than the skills, behaviours, values and judgement that the role actually requires. Non-technical managers or HR may struggle to define what success looks like in practice without sufficient operational support. And when job adverts lack specificity, unsuitable candidates are more easily selected, costing organisational time, and frustrating managers during interview. Automated CV screening tools here increase the biases, functionally moving employers further from the candidates they seek. This mixture of generic job descriptions and unclear requirements obscures the actual role and further distorts candidates' understanding of the day-to-day pressures, role scope, and development timelines to expect in-post.

Our discussions also highlighted a gap between the potential purpose and fulfilment of work and its physical or psychological toll. These trade-offs are rarely communicated honestly during recruitment or early employment. In sectors with acute skills shortages, the balance may simply be

unattractive to modern candidates, particularly where tolerances for physical and psychological toll are lower than in previous generations.

Overall, our discussions pointed to a need for greater realism and transparency to avoid embedding risk at the point of hire. When the realities of work are obscured or oversold, the result is disengagement, stalled development, poor return on training investment, and weaker trust between employers and employees. This is sector agnostic and detrimental at a national level. Aligning expectation with reality through clearer job description, consistent messaging during recruitment and honest delivery of advertised conditions is fundamental to sustainable attraction, development, and retention.

Poor role definition and inflated job requirements

Clearer role definition and more proportionate hiring criteria would remove avoidable recruitment barriers, make skill requirements more visible, and reduce the risk of mismatch at the point of hire.

Poor role definition emerged in our discussions as a systemic risk. As discussed in the section above, roles are often advertised using outdated or aspirational descriptions that do not reflect the reality. Generic job descriptions and person specifications failing to define the judgement, behaviours, values and competencies the role actually requires can embed risk from the point of hire.

A recurring problem is poor definition between roles which require people management and those exclusively requiring technical competence. When these distinctions are not made clear, assumptions may be made either by candidate or employer resulting in the creation of a managerial competency risk akin to those discussed in Chapter 3.

Role clarity may be weakened further where responsibilities overlap, roles are merged, or job boundaries shift without corresponding changes to competence frameworks. In the absence of clear definition of responsibilities workers may drift or be moved into roles for which they lack competency introducing OSH and productivity risks.

In sectors where workers could once move between employers and expect similar responsibilities, growing role diversification has made competence requirements less consistent and progression less predictable. This can make it harder for workers to transfer between organisations and for employers to assess readiness accurately.

Alongside this, job requirements are sometimes being inflated at recruitment. When asked to define the competences needed for a role, employers may “move the goalposts” for recruits by expecting qualifications, or prior experience that exceed the actual demands of day-to-day work and that are not held by existing workers in comparable posts.

These inflated requirements exclude capable people, particularly young workers, career changers, and those whose experience has been gained through informal or transferable routes. Organisations may then interpret the resulting recruitment difficulties as a skills shortage, when the underlying problem is poor role definition and resultant challenges in assessing candidates’ suitability.

Workspace design and sense of belonging

Physical and social work environments, including workspace design, visibility, personalisation, and opportunities for connection, directly affect motivation, learning, and retention.

A sense of belonging emerged as an important factor in retention and workforce capability. People are more likely to stay, learn, and contribute effectively when they feel visible, valued, and connected to their organisation's wider purpose.

Our discussions suggested that many modern workplaces unintentionally stifle workers' sense of belonging. Standardised, depersonalised work environments, economised anti-social spaces full of sanitised hot-desking stations. It's not hard to imagine how this would reduce emotional attachment to work and make office attendance feel transactional rather than purposeful. Poorly designed physical environments also weaken collaboration, informal learning, and everyday visibility, all of which support skill development and worker engagement.

As discussed in detail by the Future Work Design, Human Factors work at University of Hull⁹, hybrid and remote working can intensify these issues by reducing visibility, opportunity for social connection, and access day-to-day support from colleagues going beyond work and skill. In many organisations, temporary arrangements introduced quickly during the pandemic have become permanent without sufficient assessment of their longer-term cultural and developmental effects on work and skill. Workspaces that foster belonging therefore play an important but often overlooked role in sustaining motivation, engagement, and the long-term development of skills and competence.

Effective workspace design extends beyond physical layout to include how learning and leadership presence are enabled. Coaching, shadowing, and peer-to-peer learning strengthen inclusion, belonging and identity at work, while visible leadership reinforces value, trust, and community. Organisations that balance flexibility with facilitating meaningful connection and visibility for their workforce are better placed to sustain engagement, development, and ultimately competence over time.



⁹ [UoH-Future-Work-Design-A4-WhitePaper-v5-small.pdf](#)

Psychological safety and learning culture

Workers need environments where they can admit uncertainty, ask questions, and learn without fear; psychological safety is therefore not an optional extra to learning, it is the condition that makes learning possible.

Just like a sense of belonging, psychological safety and learning culture are closely linked and central to workforce capability, wellbeing, and safety. Our discussions revealed that skills gaps, workload pressure, and psychological strain can reinforce one another. When organisations lack the capacity or culture to support learning, the result is not only weaker competence, but also greater stress, fatigue, error, and disengagement.

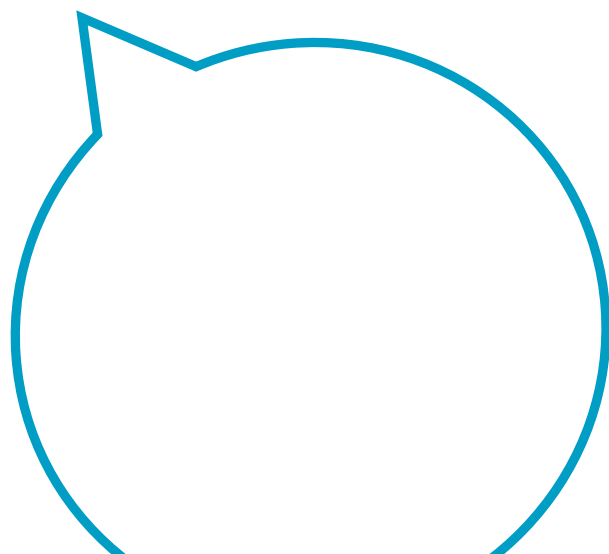
Where psychological safety is weak, workers are less likely to admit uncertainty, disclose training needs, question unsafe decisions, or ultimately remain loyal to those organisations. These workers carry risk silently, eliminating any opportunity for improved OSH control.

Effective learning depends on workers feeling safe to speak openly about training needs, uncertainty, and the limits of their competence without fear of judgement or penalty. Yet some organisations still treat training as a compliance exercise rather than a developmental and protective function.

ISO 45003 psychological health and safety management remains poorly understood as does the definition of wellbeing as ‘feeling good and functioning well’. Participants agreed that clearer communication of these concepts and a more integrated approach is needed. Like traditional health and safety, psychological safety and wellbeing cannot be dealt with in isolation from day-to-day work. They cannot sit siloed with any one department be it HR, OSH, occupational health, or operations. Effective management depends on coordinated action across these functions. So better integration is needed to align workload management, skills development, and worker wellbeing. This reflects a wider point from our discussions: psychological safety is a system property shaped by organisational design, not an individual trait. This point is well articulated by IOSH’s recent white paper ‘From Perks to Prevention’¹⁰.

Organisations with mature psychological safety and learning cultures signal a long-term commitment to protecting and developing their workforce. Open conversations about competence, alongside protected time for development, allow people to adapt safely, apply their skills, and sustain competence over time. Psychological safety is not an optional extra to learning; it is the condition that makes learning possible.

¹⁰ [IOSH White Paper – From perks to prevention | IOSH](#)



Training quality, relevance, and design

Generic, overly long, or compliance-driven training undermines competence; effective learning is modular, contextual, task-specific, and human-centred.

During our discussions training was described as falling short on quality, relevance, and design. Its value is further diminished when delivered without a clear needs analysis, and when measured by attendance or completion rather than improved performance. This compliance-driven approach, sometimes reinforced by insurer-led or training provider-led annual refresher cycles, obscures whether learning is actually strengthening judgement, competence, or contextual understanding. Uninformed procurement and limited scrutiny of outcomes can add further inefficiency.

Training is more engaging and effective when aligned to the needs of learners, this could involve organisations being flexible about when, how, and by whom it is delivered. Participants highlighted the importance of reaching workers who are often overlooked by standard provision, including shift and night workers, and of giving learners some choice over methods and content where possible.

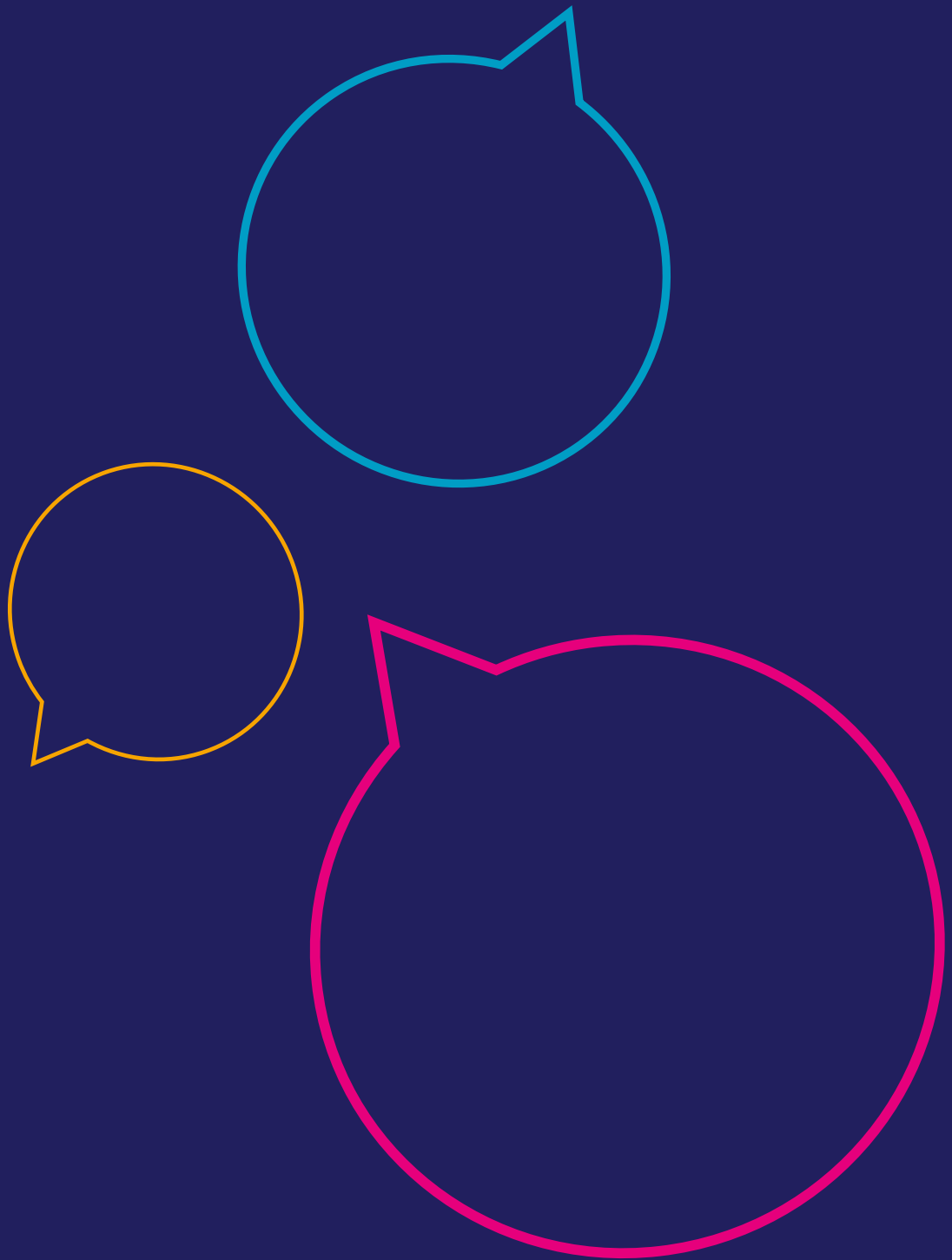
Building internal training capacity also matters. Identifying capable trainers, using train-the-trainer models, and embedding learning into everyday workflows can improve relevance and engagement from workers. Digital tools, including short instructional videos presented by colleagues, can support this by making learning easier to access in context rather than as a separate event.

Poorly targeted training diminishes engagement and return on investment. Courses that are outdated, excessively long, or built around irrelevant tasks and learning outcomes often fail to answer the learner's most basic question: **why does this matter to my job?** When training feels disconnected from real work, confidence in future training activity weakens both from worker and operational perspectives, increasing resistance to future training.

Training design can further undermine effectiveness. One-size-fits-all approaches are poorly suited to diverse, hybrid, and multi-generational workforces with different learning needs and preferences. The discussions instead pointed to modular, shorter learning; scenario-based and task-specific content; and informal methods such as mentoring, shadowing, and watch-do-teach approaches. Training should be human-centred, accessible, and inclusive, with different learning needs, including neurodiversity, considered from the outset.

Learning is most effective when embedded in everyday workflows and supported by protected time, rather than delivered as disconnected classroom events or generic e-learning. Technology can support this by simulating real tasks, recreating workplace scenarios, and reinforcing practical learning in context. Used well, it strengthens relevance and application; used badly, it turns training into another OSH compliance exercise.





Chapter five

Human capability with technology & AI

Ensuring technology strengthens competence rather than eroding it

Strategic intent: Ensure technology, including AI, is adopted safely, ethically, and transparently in ways that strengthen human judgement, foster skills, support competence development, and maintain clear accountability.

Tech-facilitated learning

Technology can make learning more relevant, accessible, scalable, and inclusive, but it should complement rather than replace the real-world experience, mentoring, and practice through which competence is built.

Our discussions highlighted a clear role for technology in improving training design and delivery. Digital tools can support short, role-specific modules, screen-capture demonstrations, scenario-based content, and micro-learning that is easier to fit around operational demands and deliver ‘in-the-flow’. Virtual and augmented reality may be particularly useful where workers need to rehearse responses to high-risk situations without exposure to live hazards. New AI-enabled tools may reduce the cost and labour involved in competent colleagues producing more tailored, modular and accessible training materials. If used responsibly this could broaden the scope of training provided to workers and reduce the reliance on out-of-the-box e-learning materials which have become particularly unpopular.

Used well, tech-facilitated approaches could make training more timely, engaging, and relevant to real tasks. However, our discussion participants were equally clear that some aspects of competence can only be developed through on-site experience, supervised practice, and interaction with experienced colleagues. Technology can scale-up access to learning and support practical development, but it cannot substitute the real-world experience through which judgement, skill, and context-sensitive decision-making are honed.



Balancing automation with human experience

Over-automation can erode judgement, weaken skills development, and reduce human connection; technology should support, not replace, the gathering of experience through which competence is built.

AI, automation, and surveillance are changing how work is organised and controlled. While they can improve efficiency and reduce administrative burden, the discussions highlighted a consistent risk: when automation is pursued primarily for short-term gain, organisations may strip out the very tasks and activities through which judgement, competence, and practical skill develop. This is especially significant for early-career workers, whose progression often depends on repeated exposure to hone skills, observation of experienced colleagues, and gradual increases in freedoms and responsibility.

Our discussion participants also warned that over-automation can weaken the human conditions that support safe and effective work. Automated onboarding, digital-only training, and reduced day-to-day contact may improve consistency and convenience of record keeping, but they can also diminish trust, sense of belonging, and the informal learning that comes from working alongside other people.

The challenge is therefore not whether to adopt technology, but how to do so without hollowing out the human experience of work. Organisations need to be deliberate about which tasks can be automated, which developmental opportunities must be protected, and where human presence remains essential. Without that balance, short-term efficiency gains may come at the expense of long-term worker loyalty, skills development, and workforce capability with serious consequences for OSH.

AI creating false confidence

AI can foster over-reliance, mask incompetence, introduce errors, and amplify existing bias. Responsible use requires new literacy, verification, and escalation skills.

The rapid adoption of AI in workplaces has created a new and poorly understood category of risk: false confidence. AI-enabled systems and large language models can produce outputs that appear credible, authoritative, and complete even when they are inaccurate or wrong. This can create an illusion of competence, particularly when outputs are generated or used by workers who lack the competence to scrutinise outputs, detect errors or challenge what they are given. As with a qualification lacking experience, the appearance of competence can easily be mistaken for the real thing. In safety-critical settings, that false confidence is itself a risk when it masks the need for further training, competent scrutiny, and verification of competency before failure occurs.

A core competence gap underpins these risks. Whether recognised or not, the danger posed by seemingly credible AI outputs is amplified when managers or workers lack the technical understanding or authority to question them. Without AI literacy and critical thinking skills, and clear escalation routes supported by positive culture, organisations may defer judgement to systems that cannot carry legal or professional accountability. The result is not only error, but misguided trust in outputs that have not been competently verified, inadvertently placing people at risk.

Effective scrutiny is made harder by the growing complexity of AI-enabled systems and the way they can spread across teams, functions, and suppliers. It is increasingly common for no single individual to have full oversight or understanding of how AI-enabled systems operate and what assumptions they embed. This creates conditions for over-reliance on built-in assumptions and weakens accountability unless governance and the role of ‘human-in-the-loop’ oversight are deliberately strengthened.

Over-reliance on AI can also accelerate skill erosion and encourage unconscious incompetence, where individuals believe they are competent because AI provides answers. Early-career roles are particularly vulnerable here. As AI takes over entry-level tasks, opportunities to build foundational skills, hone professional judgement and absorb tacit knowledge can shrink. Combined with hybrid and remote working this weakens the traditional pathways through which competence develops.

The discussions were clear that AI outputs must be scrutinised by competent workers. Critical thinking, verification, escalation, and awareness of the limits of one’s own competence are now essential skills across the workforce, not just for OSH professionals. Without deliberate investment in these skills, AI adoption risks creating confident systems and compliant users, but a less competent and less safe workforce.

AI governance, ethics, and accountability gaps

AI adoption should be matched by clear governance, meaningful consultation, strong OSH involvement, and well-defined accountability, standards, and acceptable use so that innovation is introduced safely, ethically, and with confidence in practice.

AI adoption is exposing significant governance, ethical, accountability and health and safety gaps. Many organisations lack clear competence frameworks, defined ownership, or integrated governance arrangements, and AI is often being introduced in pockets or silos rather than assessed alongside other strategic and operational risks. Where policies do exist, they are commonly IT-led and focused on data security rather than embedded in wider organisational risk, OSH, learning, and leadership systems.

Accountability for the outputs of AI remains poorly understood. Legal and professional responsibility for decisions and outputs continues to rest with competent people rather than technology, but this is not always reflected in how AI is deployed in practice. There is still limited case law to guide decisions on liability, insurance, or failure arising from AI-generated outputs, particularly where AI is used to draft policies, risk assessments, create designs, or training materials without sufficient competent human oversight, verification, or consultation.

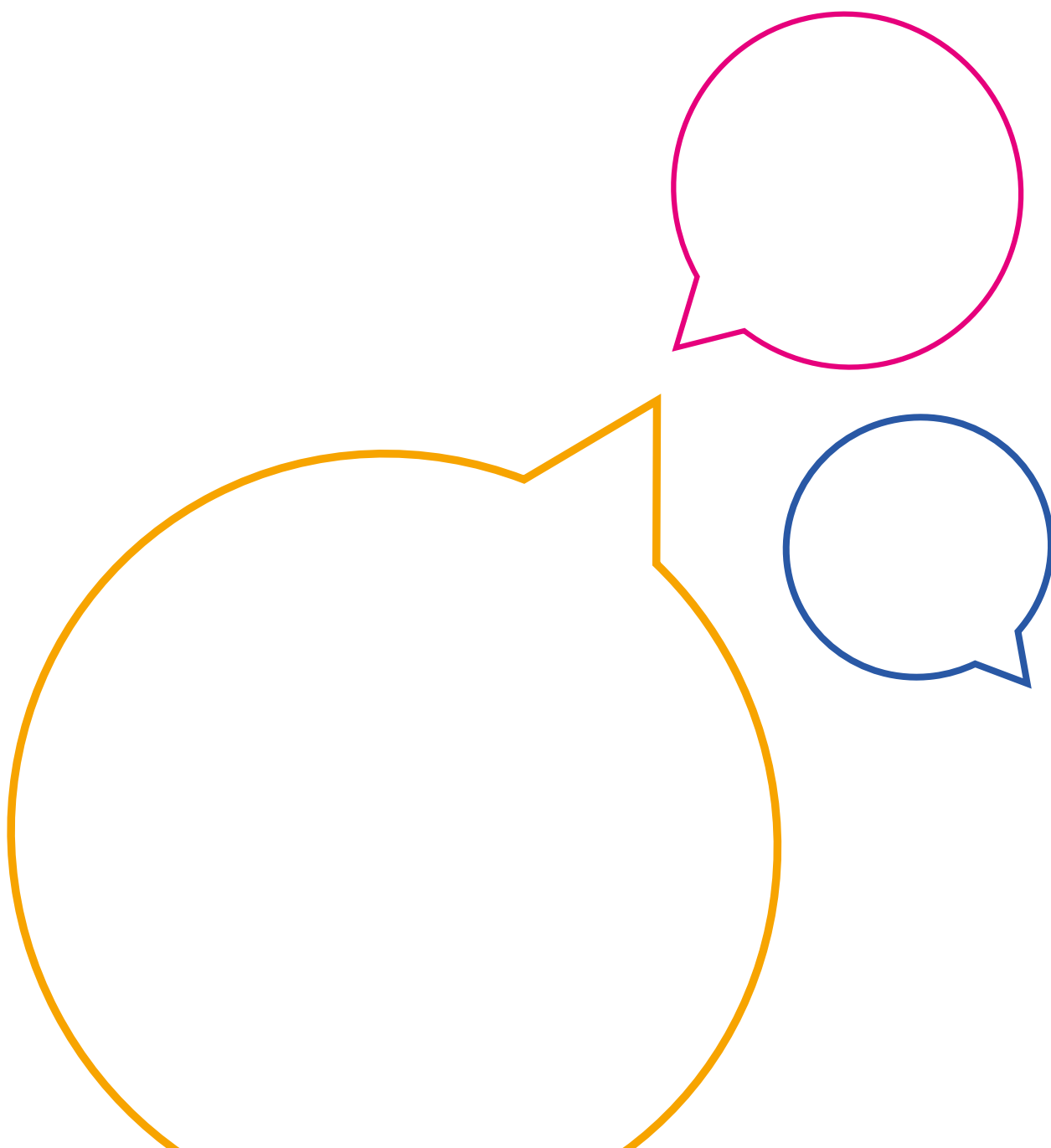
Ethical risks are also significant. AI-enabled recruitment and CV screening raise concerns about fairness, bias, inclusion, and transparency, while unchecked algorithmic management can reduce worker autonomy and increase stress. A growing reliance on algorithms can also narrow organisational attention to what is most easily measured, limiting innovation and devaluing skills or competence that are not formally recognised by the existing bias embedded in AI-enabled systems thus further widening the gap.

Digital and AI-enabled change can expose the consequences of late or superficial consultation sharply. Enterprise-level decisions, such as global software rollouts or algorithmic management

tools, are often made centrally with limited transparency, or worker (or even organisational) input. These changes can introduce new risks, including bias, stress, loss of autonomy, and reduced visibility of hazards. These risks are intensified when AI and digital tools are introduced or changed rapidly, for example through updates imposed by global providers.

Over-reliance on technology without human oversight creates safety-critical uncertainty, while the use of AI-generated policies or risk assessments without consultation can severely damage trust. Responsibility remains with people, yet those held accountable are increasingly excluded from the decisions that shape risk.

Overall, the challenge is not simply to manage innovative use of AI and new technology, but to govern it responsibly. Without clear accountability, meaningful consultation, ethical oversight, and strong human verification, AI adoption risks undermining worker safety, trust, competence, and organisational resilience rather than enhancing them.



Conclusion

The OSH Skills Commission concludes that desirable OSH outcomes are not assured by processes and qualified workers; the competence which supports desirable OSH outcomes is built and sustained through experience, leadership, culture, and organisational design.

Many organisations still try to recruit competence rather than build it, even as they recognise the conditions for learning have weakened. Reduced early-career experience, limited mentoring, poor knowledge transfer, skills and resource shortages, and ineffective consultation, are undermining the value associated with newly qualified people and early-career workers as they also face growing competition from AI-enabled tools capable of performing entry-level tasks

Simultaneously major labour shifts are occurring including economic inactivity amongst young people, an ageing workforce, and rapid AI adoption. The consequences for OSH professionals are stark and have already been felt. Competence is central in supporting safe, healthy workplaces, fostering wellbeing, productivity, and stability. Now more than ever, competence must be treated as a strategic asset that requires deliberate protection and development.

So the Commission calls for a change: view competence as a core organisational asset worthy of active stewardship, and for all stakeholders to shoulder and share responsibility for enabling continuous learning across working lives



Glossary of terms

Capability

The ability of organisations and industry sectors to achieve strategic goals through the total combined skills, competence, and behaviours of the workforce.

Competence

As described by HSE as the combination of training, skills, experience and knowledge that a person has and their ability to apply them to perform a task safely. Other factors, such as attitude and physical ability, can also affect someone's competence.

Control

A measure that maintains and/or modifies risk.

Human-in-the-loop

An automated system or process in which a human actively participates in the operation, supervision or decision-making.

Life course fit

The alignment between an individual's current stage of life and their environment or routines.

Policy

Intentions and direction of an organisation as formally expressed by its management.

Psychological safety

As associated with an open, respectful environment where employees feel valued and secure; feeling comfortable speaking up, asking for help and communicating concerns, without fear of negative consequences.

Risk

The effect of uncertainty: a factor of the consequences and likelihood of an event.

Skills

Learned abilities to perform a specific task or activity with consistent, successful results. Skill subcategories: non-technical, soft-skills which are highly transferable, non-task specific and include activities such as listening, problem solving and teamwork; technical, hard-skills which are specific to roles and usually accompanied by specific knowledge.

Watch-do-teach

A three-step learning model where learners first observe a skill, then practice it under supervision, and finally strengthen understanding by explaining or teaching it to someone else.

Workplace wellbeing

As defined in ISO 45003 as the fulfilment of the physical, mental, social and cognitive needs and expectations of a worker related to their work. It "relates to all aspects of working life, including work organisation, social factors at work, and work environment and hazardous tasks". It "can also contribute to the quality of life outside of work."



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