
RESEARCH REPORT**Skills Assessment**

Bridging the Gap: AI Skills Readiness in the Canadian Workforce — 2026 Assessment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report assesses the current state of AI skills readiness across the Canadian workforce, examining the gap between employer AI adoption intentions and actual employee capability. Drawing on CSBAA training enrollment data, employer surveys, and Skills Canada alignment frameworks, the report identifies the highest-priority training needs by sector and role type.

The central finding is a widening readiness gap: employer ambition to deploy AI tools is running well ahead of the organizational capacity to use them effectively. While adoption intent is nearly universal among surveyed employers, structured training remains the exception rather than the rule — and the employees most exposed to AI tools in their daily work are the least likely to have received any formal instruction.

1. BACKGROUND

Between 2024 and 2026, generative AI tools moved from pilot projects into everyday workflows across Canadian organizations of every size. Procurement decisions have largely been made at the leadership level, driven by productivity expectations and competitive pressure. Workforce preparation, however, has not kept pace: most organizations acquired tools first and are only now confronting the question of who is equipped to use them well.

CSBAA's training inquiry pipeline offers a direct window into this transition. The volume of employer inquiries in the first quarter of 2026 exceeded the whole of 2025, and the nature of those inquiries has shifted — from general awareness sessions toward role-specific, competency-based training requests. This report consolidates that signal with survey evidence to describe where the readiness gap is largest and what closing it would require.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a mixed-methods study combining three evidence streams:

- **CSBAA training inquiry data** — all employer training inquiries received January–March 2026 (n=847 organizations), coded by sector, organization size, requested competency area, and target role group
- **Employer training needs survey** — a structured survey of Canadian employers (n=291) covering AI adoption plans, current training provision, budget allocation, and perceived skill gaps by role
- **Secondary sources** — Skills Canada alignment frameworks and published labour-market data, used to benchmark competency definitions and sector baselines

Inquiry data and survey responses were analyzed independently and then cross-referenced. Findings reported as percentages are drawn from the employer survey unless otherwise noted; inquiry data is used to rank competency demand and to describe sector patterns.

3. THE READINESS GAP

3.1 Adoption intent vs. training provision

82% of surveyed employers plan to increase AI tool usage within the next 12 months. Only 34% have a formal training plan attached to that expansion, and just 21% have allocated a dedicated budget line for AI skills development. The remainder rely on informal, self-directed learning — an approach that survey respondents themselves rate as insufficient for consistent, safe use.

3.2 The frontline paradox

Frontline and administrative staff are the highest-volume AI tool users in most organizations — drafting correspondence, summarizing documents, handling customer interactions. They are also the group employers rate as least prepared. Technical staff, by contrast, receive the majority of existing training investment despite lower day-to-day exposure to general-purpose AI tools. This inversion — training concentrated where exposure is lowest — is the single clearest structural feature of the readiness gap.

3.3 The small-business gap

Organizations with fewer than 50 employees report adoption intent equal to or higher than larger firms, but are half as likely to budget for training. Small employers cite cost, time away from operations, and difficulty judging training quality as the principal barriers — pointing to a need for short-format, role-specific programs rather than broad curricula.

4. PRIORITY COMPETENCY AREAS

Ranked by frequency across 847 employer training inquiries (January–March 2026):

Rank	Competency area	What employers are asking for
1	Prompt engineering	Getting reliable, task-appropriate output from general-purpose AI tools
2	AI output evaluation	Verifying accuracy, spotting fabrication, knowing when not to trust a result
3	Responsible AI use	Privacy, confidentiality, disclosure, and appropriate-use boundaries
4	Workflow integration	Embedding AI steps into existing processes without quality loss
5	Data handling fundamentals	Preparing, sharing, and protecting data used with AI tools

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Train where the exposure is.** Redirect training investment toward frontline, administrative, and customer-facing roles — the highest-volume users with the largest measured gap.
- **Pair every adoption decision with a training plan.** Organizations expanding AI tool usage should treat structured training as a condition of rollout, not an afterthought.
- **Build short, role-specific formats for small employers.** Half-day, task-anchored sessions address the cost and time barriers small organizations cite most often.
- **Lead with evaluation and responsible use.** Competency in judging AI output and respecting use boundaries should precede advanced productivity training.
- **Benchmark against a shared framework.** Aligning internal training to Skills Canada competency definitions allows progress to be measured consistently across sectors.

6. CONCLUSION

Canadian employers are not short on AI ambition — they are short on the workforce capability to realize it. The gap is largest precisely where AI use is heaviest, and smallest organizations face it with the fewest resources. Closing it is achievable: demand for structured training is strong, the priority competencies are clearly identified, and shared frameworks exist to organize the effort. The organizations that pair adoption with deliberate skills investment over the next 12 months will convert AI intent into measurable capability; those that do not will accumulate risk alongside their tools.

