HR Skills Insights

Creating a future-ready HR team built for success

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Foreword

The HR profession expands

The Human Resources profession remains one of the most complex professions in business. Once considered an administrative cost-center, today HR teams are responsible for many complex business problems, ranging from strategic hiring, organization design, leadership and performance, to of course the implementation of AI.

SHL's research clearly shows how high-performing HR professionals today are multi-faceted consultants, able to deal with issues of leadership and culture as well as technology and data. They combine skills in hiring and training with complex issues like burnout, remote work, and employee engagement. And throughout it all, they must consider change, transformation and innovation in their solutions.

While many HR skills are service-oriented, the trend is clearly toward complex multi-disciplinary skills. And as the SHL research points out, HR skills are learned over time. This is why HR professionals are so committed to their careers: they can grow, learn, and add value in new ways every year.

I want to thank SHL for this important research. Each one of us relies on HR for many important parts of our companies and our careers, and this study helps HR leaders and teams make sure they're staying current on all there is to learn.
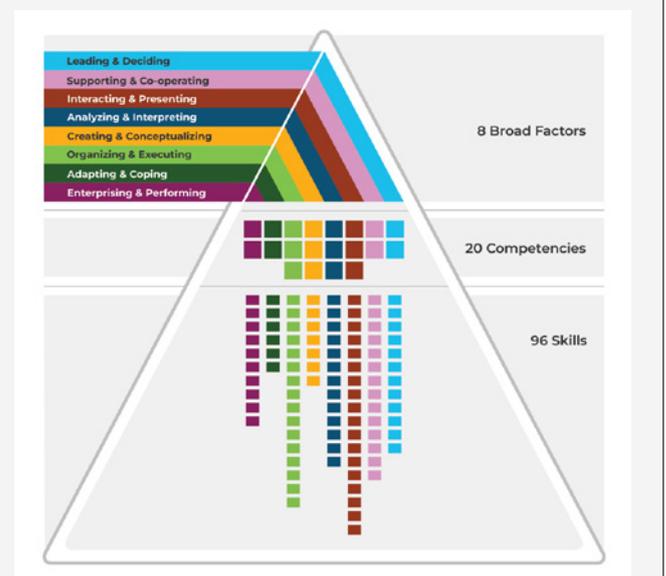
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Introduction

Drawing on objective assessment data from over 5,500 HR professionals completing SHL's Global Skills Assessment across the globe and an extensive literature review, this report will help HR professionals understand more about the specific skills that drive success in their function and how these can be harnessed to succeed in a dynamic, global workplace.

SHL's Universal Competency Framework

Underpinning this research is the Global Skills Assessment, a behavioral skills measurement based on SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF), and the Global Skills Taxonomy—a three-tiered scientifically validated model for understanding and assessing people's behaviors at work. Designed to be both objective and predictive, the UCF is built on decades of empirical research that clearly links broad competencies to 96 behavioral skills and real-world business results.

Leading & Deciding
Supporting & Co-operating
Interacting & Presenting
Analyzing & Interpreting
Creating & Conceptualizing
Organizing & Executing
Adapting & Coping
Enterprising & Performing

8 Broad Factors

20 Competencies

96 Skills

The report is divided into three sections.

Over Time: how the skills of HR professionals compare over three time periods: 2020, 2025 and 2030.

By Job Level: skills critical for success from entry-level through senior executive positions.

By Region: how HR skills differ across regions in criticality and availability of those skills.

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Evolution of HR Skills Over Time

HR has undergone huge transformation with increasing responsibilities and unprecedented challenges. We look at how the skills of HR professionals have changed from 2020 to the present day, and what skills are likely to be critical by 2030.

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A decade of change: how HR is transforming

In the past half-decade, unforeseen events have overturned even the most well-informed predictions. Global instability caused by Covid-19, dramatic shifts in political dynamics, and rapid technological advancements—particularly in artificial intelligence (AI)—have forced organizations into a whirlwind of change. During this time, human resources (HR) teams have found themselves at the forefront of adaptation.

As HR professionals are now expected to manage both day-to-day operations and strategic initiatives, the complexity and sophistication of their required skills have increased. The rise of AI and automation in HR processes creates a need for developing technical skills continuously and staying current with technological advancements.

However, skills gaps persist, complicating recruitment efforts. To address these challenges, organizations have increasingly turned to freelancers and independent workers, while also investing in upskilling current employees through "quiet hiring." By understanding the skills needed to meet evolving business needs, organizations can empower employees to focus on developing those skills to achieve future goals.

The following analysis reveals a clear shift from the immediate crisis management skills required in 2020, to more strategic and future-oriented skills necessary in 2025, and into 2030.

We explore the key areas of HR focus over this decade, and compare the individual skills HR professionals required to succeed in the past with those skills that are likely to lead to future success.

2020: A year of change for HR professionals

The year 2020 marked a pivotal time for HR professionals in light of global events. The Covid-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed the workplace, with remote work becoming a widespread necessity.

With this shift, new priorities emerged including managing a dispersed workforce, ensuring business continuity, and addressing the heightened need for employee well-being and mental health initiatives.

New workplace dynamics were driven by trends like 'quiet quitting' and the 'great resignation.' 'Quiet quitting' refers to employees doing only the minimum required at work. The 'great resignation' describes many workers leaving jobs for better opportunities or work-life balance. These emerging dynamics required HR to innovate retention and engagement strategies.

Additionally, the rise of social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter, refocused attention towards inclusion for all and reinvigorated organizations' efforts to review and improve their practices.

To navigate this rapidly changing landscape, HR professionals needed to quickly adapt and expand their skillsets, focusing on digital literacy, crisis management, change management, and data-driven decision-making, among other skills.

HR held a strategic role in fostering resilience and agility to promote smooth transitions for organizations as they adjusted to these rising demands. Those HR leaders who found success by upskilling and reskilling their teams benefited from comparatively less disruption, more fluid transitions, and a more effective, motivated, and engaged workforce.

Key areas of HR focus in 2020

Remote Workforce Management

Diversity and Inclusion

Employee Wellbeing and Mental Health

Talent Retention and Engagement

Data-Driven Decision Making

Crisis & Change Management

Digital Literacy

Communication Skills

Legal and Compliance Knowledge

2025: Prioritizing transformation and agility

Key areas of HR focus in 2025

Hybrid Workforce Management

Realignment of Inclusive Practices

Mental Health Advocacy

Employee Experience Management

Strategic Workforce Planning

Agile HR Practices

AI and Automation Proficiency

Upskilling and Reskilling

As we progress through 2025, HR professionals find themselves in a post-pandemic era defined by business transformation, accelerated AI integration, and a realignment of inclusive practices in which data-driven strategies gain traction, while some organizations scale back or even eliminate their initiatives.

This new work landscape has already spurred the need for more data-driven and holistic approaches to strategic planning, to address skills gaps and streamline HR processes.[7,8] These interventions are often used to upskill and reskill current employees—a phenomenon known as "quiet hiring." Additionally, the integration of freelancers and gig workers across parts of the world, like the Middle East and Northern Africa,[3] has necessitated new management approaches. HR's role in strategic workforce planning and ethical AI use has become more pronounced, highlighting a necessity for professionals to continuously evolve their skillsets to remain effective in a rapidly changing environment.

The key areas to focus on in 2025 show how those sets of skills developed over recent years continue to be of importance. While remote workforce management was critical in 2020, in 2025 we see a shift to hybrid workforces, with some organizations implementing mandates for employees to return to the office full-time. Inclusion initiatives and well-being strategies have been part of the workplace culture for several years. As organizations reflect on these initiatives, many are beginning to adjust and realign their policies. The prominence of agile HR practices highlights that HR leaders have embraced the importance of adapting to changing business needs quickly.

2030: AI and Gen Z pioneer a new era for HR

By 2030 the role of HR professionals will be increasingly intertwined with technological advancements and global socio-economic trends. Human-AI collaboration is likely to become standard practice, necessitating proficiency in leveraging AI to enhance productivity and decision-making. Advanced data analytics will be critical in predicting workforce trends and crafting strategic initiatives.

Gen Z will be the dominant working generation, bringing their working preferences and broader societal values[5] to the forefront of the workforce. These include inclusion initiatives[1], sustainability, and social responsibility—all of which will be integral to HR strategies. Managing a global, diverse workforce will demand enhanced cross-cultural competencies. Personalized employee development plans powered by AI will cater to individual career growth, while cybersecurity awareness will be crucial in protecting sensitive employee data[5].

Emotional intelligence and empathy will remain foundational as HR navigates complex interpersonal dynamics and supports holistic employee wellbeing[6]. Flexible workforce strategies will be vital in adapting to continuous changes, solidifying HR's role in fostering inclusive and agile organizational cultures.

Key areas of HR focus in 2030

Human-AI Collaboration

Advanced Data Analytics

Sustainability and Social Responsibility

Global Talent Management

Personalized Employee Development

Cybersecurity Awareness

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

Realigned Inclusive Practices

Flexible Workforce Strategies

Competencies contributing to success

Using SHL's Universal Competency Framework, the key areas of HR focus were mapped to the competencies required to achieve success. The table below shows each of those competencies across the three time periods analyzed, with a brief description, to show which have increased or lessened in importance. The five highlighted competencies have maintained importance over the whole decade (2020-2030).

Competencies Contributing to HR Success	2030	2025	2020
Adaptability – adjusts flexibly to change and ambiguity, embraces new cultures and finds opportunities in shifting demands.	●	●	●
Applying Expertise and Technology – leverages technical expertise and technology to enhance the HR function, communicates effectively, and improves systems and processes.	●	●	●
Building Relationships – develops relationships, networks, manages conflict, and helps others succeed.	●	●	
Collaboration – fosters collaborative environments by valuing others' perspectives, promoting mutual respect, and building cohesion both within and across teams.	●	●	●
Creativity and Innovation – embraces new ideas, seeks out diverse perspectives and thinks in new and different ways to create innovative approaches and solutions.	●		
Critical Thinking – questions and analyses information to identify patterns, challenge assumptions, and develop effective solutions.	●		●
Ethics and Values – sets an example for ethical values and trust in and around the organization.	●		
Initiative – proactively tackles demanding goals, roles and assignments, works autonomously and strives to outperform others.	●	●	●
Leadership – leads, coaches, empowers and motivates others, delegates work based on skills and potential while setting clear goals and standards.	●	●	●
Planning and Organizing – sets objectives aligned with team and organizational goals, develops plans and allocates resources to deliver work on time effectively.		●	
Strategic Thinking – thinks broadly, considers issues that impact success today and in the future, develops strategies and seeks opportunities to introduce change.		●	●
Communication – understands spoken information, speaks clearly with confidences, adjusts communication style to suit audience.			●
Dependability – takes direction, adheres to policies and procedures, reliable, punctual and prioritizes safety and security of people and information.			●
Writing – understands written information, writes clearly, succinctly and correctly to meet audience needs and stimulate interest.			●

Evolution of skills over time

Using SHL's Global Skills Taxonomy, the most detailed level of the UCF, as a framework, we conducted further analysis. We looked at key areas of HR focus with a more granular lens. In doing so, we determined the individual skills within each critical competency that contributed to success.

The table below shows the evolution of those skills over time. The five skills in bold have stood the test of time, remaining critical for HR professionals from 2020, through to today, and into the future.

UCF Skills	2030	2025	2020
Adapts to change	●	●	●
Analyzes information	●		●
Applies functional expertise	●	●	●
Demonstrates empathy	●	●	●
Embraces new ideas	●		
Encourages diversity	●	●	●
Focuses on self-development	●	●	●
Manages conflict	●	●	
Supports and coaches others	●	●	
Builds, designs, or creates new tools or systems		●	
Considers strategic vision		●	●
Coordinates others' work		●	●
Motivates and empowers others		●	●
Operates job related technology		●	●
Plans ahead		●	
Communicates using technology			●
Complies with rules and regulations			●
Makes rational judgments			●
Speaks clearly			●
Writes with clarity			●

Conclusion

Differences in HR skills over time reflect a clear progression from immediate crisis response to long-term strategic planning and innovation, accentuating the critical need for CHROs to ensure their HR teams possess the right skills to adapt to change.

The increasing complexity of the HR function shows that it is essential for CHROs to lead with agility, innovation, and dedication to continuous improvement. The responsibilities of CHROs now include the strategic drive of business success and the development of teams who are adaptable, forward-thinking, and skilled in managing complex technology-driven environments.

In 2020 the focus of HR work was on crisis management, remote work, inclusion and accessible practices in response to the pandemic as well as social movements. By 2025 the emphasis has shifted toward managing hybrid work environments, leveraging AI, and advancing existing strategies, reflecting the ongoing adaptation to technological advancements and shifting workforce dynamics. Looking ahead to 2030, core skills will likely include human-AI collaboration, advanced data analytics, and global talent management, prospecting a future where technology and globalization play central roles.

The challenges that HR leaders have had to combat across all time periods include the importance of inclusion, integration of technology in HR practices, and the continuous need for adaptability and strategic planning.

One trend which has remained constant is the importance for HR professionals to **focus on self-development**. Research shows that HR professionals who commit to continuous development and keep their skills current by attending training, gaining formal qualifications, and creating and leveraging peer networks, are more likely to be successful, motivated, and satisfied in their careers.[2,1,4] To effectively support the growth of HR professionals, it is crucial to use objective, data-driven methods to assess their current skill levels. This approach ensures that resources such as time, money, and training are directed toward the areas where HR teams have the greatest skills gaps, maximizing the impact of development efforts.

HR leaders who prioritize upskilling their HR teams are better equipped to handle both day-to-day operations and future challenges, making them more resilient and giving them the best chance to succeed in the future. Alternatively, organizations that fail to support their HR teams in this way risk falling behind in an increasingly competitive and changing work landscape.

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HR Skills By Job Level

As the field of Human Resources (HR) evolves, understanding the diverse skill sets required at various career stages is crucial. What are the foundational competencies that are important across job levels? What skills are critical for a fresh graduate in an entry-level HR role versus a senior executive, and why?

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Comparing competencies across job levels

We reviewed the competencies needed today for four HR job levels: Entry-Level, Professional/Individual Contributor, Manager, and Director. This enabled us to identify foundational competencies required consistently across all job levels and why they are important to HR teams. In addition, for each job level, we took an in-depth look at those skills outside of the foundational competencies that result in success, and why they are important.

The table below shows all twenty competencies in SHL's Universal Competency Framework and their importance to each of the four job roles. Our analysis showed just over half of the competencies were relevant to all job roles, demonstrating the variety of skills required to succeed as an HR professional today. These foundational competencies are shown in bold.

Competencies	Entry-Level	Professional/ Individual Contributor	Manager	Director & Executive
Adaptability	●	●	●	●
Applying Expertise and Technology	●	●	●	●
Building Relationships			●	●
Collaboration	●	●	●	●
Commercial Thinking	●	●	●	●
Communication	●	●	●	●
Creativity and Innovation	●	●		
Critical Thinking	●	●	●	●
Decision Making	●	●	●	●
Delivering Results	●	●	●	●
Dependability	●	●		
Ethics and Values	●	●	●	●
Influence	●	●	●	●
Initiative	●	●		
Leadership			●	●
Learning	●	●	●	●
Planning and Organizing	●	●	●	
Resilience		●	●	●
Strategic Thinking			●	●
Writing	●	●		

Foundational HR competencies

Unlike level-specific skills, which evolve with increasing responsibility—such as a greater emphasis on 'Leadership' and 'Strategic Thinking' at the managerial level—foundational competencies are consistently required and valued across all HR roles. These competencies create a stable base upon which specialized skills are built, ensuring that all HR professionals, regardless of position, uphold the integrity, adaptability, and efficacy of the HR function. The following table shows foundational competencies identified through a literature review of two leading HR frameworks,[1,2] mapped to SHL's UCF.

Competency	Importance to HR teams
Ethics and Values - setting an example for ethical values and trust in and around the organization.	Upholding ethics and values is essential for HR professionals to maintain organizational trust and integrity.
Influence - building credibility and using compelling insights to secure buy-in for HR initiatives.	Influence is crucial for HR leaders to drive organizational alignment and advocate for HR's role in business strategy.
Communication - conveying ideas clearly and confidently, adapting style to effectively engage with stakeholders.	Strong communication supports HR's role in advocating for employees and aligning organizational goals.
Collaboration - fosters collaborative environments by valuing others' perspectives, promoting mutual respect, and building cohesion both within and across teams.	HR has a key role in managing relationships across the organization. Collaborative efforts strengthen HR's impact on employee engagement and team cohesion.
Commercial Thinking - understanding organizational priorities, balancing risks, and optimizing resources to drive business performance.	For HR, commercial thinking enables alignment of HR initiatives with business goals, directly contributing to organizational growth and success.
Learning - pursuing continuous development, quickly grasping new information and methodologies to support informed decision-making.	In HR, a focus on learning is vital to keep pace with evolving workplace trends, improving HR's ability to innovate and adapt practices that drive employee and organizational development.
Critical Thinking - questioning and analyzing information to identify patterns, challenge assumptions, and develop effective solutions.	Critical thinking empowers HR professionals to make evidence-based decisions that optimize HR strategy and organizational effectiveness.
Decision Making - making timely, informed decisions by assessing risks and context, taking responsibility for outcomes.	Decision-making skills in HR ensure policies and initiatives are responsive to unique organizational needs and challenges.
Delivering Results - meeting employee and organizational needs, setting high HR standards, driving productivity, and prioritizing initiatives.	Outcome-focused HR teams take responsibility for delivering business goals, providing timely solutions, and driving organizational success through effective people strategies.
Adaptability - adjusting flexibly to change and ambiguity, embracing new cultures and finding opportunities in shifting demands.	Adaptability is essential for HR's role in supporting agile work practices and navigating organizational transformations.
Applying Expertise and Technology - leveraging technical expertise and technology to enhance the HR function, communicate effectively, and improve systems and processes.	Mastering this competency enables HR professionals to effectively use tools and insights that drive operational efficiency and support data-driven decision-making.

Together these foundational competencies provide HR professionals with a universal toolkit that enhances their ability to perform effectively at any level. This allows HR to align with organizational goals and adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing workplace.

Skills by job level

Outside of the 11 foundational competencies, there are also competencies that contribute to success at individual job levels. Here we explore those competencies, together with the specialized skills that matter most, and explain why they have been shown to be important to those roles.

Entry-Level

Entry-Level HR job roles include HR Assistants and similar roles, and are generally occupied by recent college graduates. At the beginning of their careers HR professionals focus on foundational skills such as clear communication, administrative expertise, and proactive management of priorities. Teamwork, cultural awareness, and active listening are also vital at this stage, laying the groundwork for future development.

Proactive self-development and open-mindedness enhance HR process improvement and support the achievement of organizational goals.

Competency	Skills	Importance to Entry-Level roles
Writing	• **Writes with clarity**	Clear, concise writing supports effective communication and internal customer service in HR.
Initiative	• **Focuses on self-development** • **Strives to achieve**	Proactive development helps entry-level HR professionals stay updated and meet organizational needs.
Creativity and Innovation	• **Embraces new ideas**	Open-minded, adaptable thinking supports HR process improvement.
Planning and Organizing	• **Maintains documentation** • **Uses time efficiently** • **Plans ahead**	Organized, forward-thinking record-keeping and effective time management enable accurate compliance tracking and timely support in HR tasks.
Dependability	• **Accepts direction** • **Complies with rules and regulations**	Reliable, policy-focused behavior builds trust within the organization and ensures HR processes meet regulatory standards

Professional / Individual Contributor

Professional/Individual Contributor HR job roles include HR specialists and similar roles, generally occupied by professionals with more than five years of experience.

As HR professionals gain experience, the emphasis of roles shifts to more advanced functional expertise. Analytical and problem-solving skills become crucial, reflecting the increasing complexity of tasks and responsibilities.

Innovation and goal-oriented actions help HR individual contributors enhance processes, stay ahead of trends, and deliver impactful results.

Competency	Skills	Importance to Professional/ Individual Contributor roles
Writing	• **Writes with clarity**	Clear, precise writing supports effective communication across teams and ensures employees understand HR policies and guidelines.
Initiative	• **Focuses on self-development** • **Strives to achieve**	Proactive, growth-oriented actions empower HR professionals to stay current with industry trends and deliver impactful results.
Creativity and Innovation	• **Generates new ideas**	Innovative, solution-oriented thinking supports process improvement and enhances employee experience.
Planning and Organizing	• **Uses time efficiently** • **Plans ahead**	Strategic, well-organized planning enables individual contributors in HR to handle complex workloads, meet deadlines, and anticipate the needs of the business.
Dependability	• **Complies with rules and regulations**	Consistent, policy-driven actions ensure HR practices are aligned with legal requirements and organizational standards, reducing risk and enhancing trust.
Resilience	• **Thrives under pressure**	The ability to perform under pressure helps HR professionals manage challenging situations.

Manager

Managerial HR job roles include those in Administrative Services, Compensation and Benefits, Training and Development, and similar. These jobs are typically filled by HR specialists.

HR managers need to balance organizational and strategic skills, focusing on coaching, performance management, and compliance. Conflict resolution and talent acquisition/retention are key areas, highlighting the managerial role in both operational efficiency and strategic HR planning.

Strategic planning, continuous process improvement, and effective leadership enable managers to guide teams, optimize performance, and align HR practices with organizational strategy.

Competency	Skills	Importance to Manager roles
Building Relationships	• **Builds rapport** • **Manages conflict**	Trust-building and conflict-resolution skills boost internal collaboration and help create a supportive work environment.
Planning and Organizing	• **Plans ahead**	Strategic planning allows HR managers to anticipate needs, align resources, and drive operational efficiency.
Strategic Thinking	• **Considers strategic vision** • **Drives improvement**	Strategic, improvement-focused thinking aligns HR initiatives with the organization's goals, enhancing overall business performance.
Leadership	• **Supports and coaches others** • **Motivates and empowers others** • **Monitors performance** • **Provides informal feedback**	Empowering, performance-oriented leadership develops team members' skills, boosts motivation, and encourages growth across the HR function.
Dependability	• **Complies with rules and regulations**	Adherence to policies and legal standards safeguards the organization and models integrity, establishing HR as a reliable, ethical backbone of the company.
Resilience	• **Thrives under pressure**	Calm, adaptable performance in high-stakes situations ensures HR managers can handle challenges effectively while maintaining support for employees and organizational objectives.

Director & Executive

HR job roles at the Director & Executive level include Director of Human Resources, Chief Human Resources Officer, and similar roles. These jobs are typically filled by HR specialists with one or more decade(s) of experience in the field of HR.

At the highest levels, strategic thinking and leadership skills are key. Directors and executives must drive change management, instigate organizational development, and maintain stakeholder relationships. Advanced communication skills, financial acumen, and global HR expertise are also core elements of these strategic HR roles.

The ability to think ahead, lead teams, build strong relationships, and stay resilient under pressure helps executives drive success and keep HR functioning at its best.

Competency	Skills	Importance to Director & Executive roles
Strategic Thinking	• **Considers strategic vision** • **Drives improvement**	Proactive and results-oriented strategies align HR initiatives with the organization's long-term goals, fostering growth and competitive advantage.
Leadership	• **Motivates and empowers others**	Inspiring and empowering leadership promotes a high-performance culture, enhancing employee engagement and driving organizational success.
Building Relationships	• **Builds and maintains networks**	Effective relationship management strengthens partnerships within and outside the organization, facilitating collaboration and resource sharing.
Dependability	• **Complies with rules and regulations**	Demonstrating a personal commitment to legal standards and organizational policies fosters trust and integrity within the HR function, ensuring compliance and promoting ethical practices.
Resilience	• **Thrives under pressure** • **Copes with setbacks and criticism**	Composed and flexible leadership in high-stakes situations enables HR leaders to navigate obstacles effectively while maintaining focus on strategic objectives.

Conclusion

The comparison of skills required for HR professionals at various career stages highlights both foundational and role-specific competencies, showing how expertise evolves with increased responsibility. These insights can help guide HR teams in building more effective career pathways and learning journeys, helping to retain talent, plan for succession, and enable employees to grow within the organization.

Foundational competencies such as 'Ethics and Values,' 'Adaptability,' 'Collaboration,' and 'Influence,' remain essential across all levels of HR, providing a stable framework for effective performance regardless of job level. On the other hand, level-specific skills adapt to the complexity of each role as HR professionals progress.

For **Entry-Level** and **Individual Contributor** roles, key competencies such as 'Initiative,' 'Dependability,' and 'Planning and Organizing' are essential.

HR professionals at these levels focus on contributing effectively to the goals set by managers, demonstrating reliability and adopting a systematic approach to completing tasks to high standards. Successful HR professionals at these levels also demonstrate resilience and adaptability to effectively address the immediate needs of the organization and handle shifting priorities.

As professionals transition into **Manager** roles, the focus shifts to more complex 'Leadership' and 'Strategic Thinking' competencies. Skills within 'Building Relationships' and 'Communication' become central, as managers must not only establish trust with their teams but also clearly articulate their vision to inspire alignment toward shared goals. Additionally, managers must navigate difficult conversations and promote collaboration and cohesion within and across teams.

At the **Director and Executive** levels, leadership responsibilities take on an even more strategic dimension. Advanced skills in driving organizational change, developing HR strategies, and fostering talent pipelines become vital as HR leaders tackle complex challenges, and align HR goals with the broader organizational vision. These roles demand a deep understanding of talent management, workforce planning, and organizational dynamics to lead HR teams effectively. HR leaders at this level must also foster a culture of innovation, encouraging creative approaches to recruitment, retention, and employee engagement to ensure the HR function is resilient and sustainable.

Relationship-building skills, which are critical for HR leadership roles at all levels, are more prominent within the global HR population compared to the general global workforce.

Relationship-building skills enhance collaboration and communication within organizations, enabling HR professionals at all levels to effectively navigate complex workplace dynamics and bring organizational culture to life. As companies increasingly prioritize employee engagement and talent retention, HR professionals with robust relationship-building capabilities position organizations to better manage transitions and develop future leaders.

Global HR teams show strengths across communication and collaboration, suggesting that, more effectively than the general global workforce, they can leverage existing talent to cultivate a collaborative environment conducive to knowledge sharing and mentorship. This not only prepares the next generation of leaders for success but also promotes a culture of support and development within the organization. Overall, the prominence of relationship-building skills in the HR population reinforces the strategic role of HR in shaping effective leadership and sustaining organizational growth.

Finally, an emphasis on continuous professional development is essential for HR's sustained success. Leading HR organizations, including Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)[3] and the Academy to Innovate HR[4], stress that professionals who commit to lifelong learning through training, qualifications, and networking are more successful, motivated, and satisfied in their careers. Lifelong learning enhances not only individual career progression but also the adaptability and effectiveness of the HR function as a whole, enabling HR professionals to navigate organizational changes with confidence and resilience.

HR Skills Insights

HR Skills By Region

In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, equipping professionals with the right skills is essential for agile responses to the fluidity that permeates the current world of work. This section provides region-specific insights into the key skills HR professionals need to succeed and the prevalence of these skills in those regions.

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Succeeding in a global workplace

Macro trends, including advancing technology and digital transformation, economic instability, and the transition to net zero and new models of working, are driving constant change. It is to these conditions which businesses need to adapt, or risk being left behind. It's up to senior leaders and people teams to influence and shape current strategy and people practice to navigate this ever-changing landscape[1].

While we see significant differences in cultural context, economic climate, and political backdrop, some unifying elements can be identified[2]. The implementation of flexible work models, the use of independent workers to fill skills gaps and the establishment of increasingly disperse teams, have meant that HR professionals are now operating more globally. As a result, an understanding of the commonalities and differences which characterize HR skills and priorities across the globe is essential for organizational adaptability.

In this report, we focus on HR priority areas across five geographical regions: Asia-Pacific (APAC), Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), UK & Ireland, Europe, and the United States.

We examine the results of HR professionals who completed SHL's Global Skills Assessment (GSA; 96-skill assessment based on the Universal Competency Framework) between September 2021 and March 2024, to understand skill prevalence by region. We compare average candidate scores for each region with global averages in order to study the priorities, strengths, and development gaps in different areas.
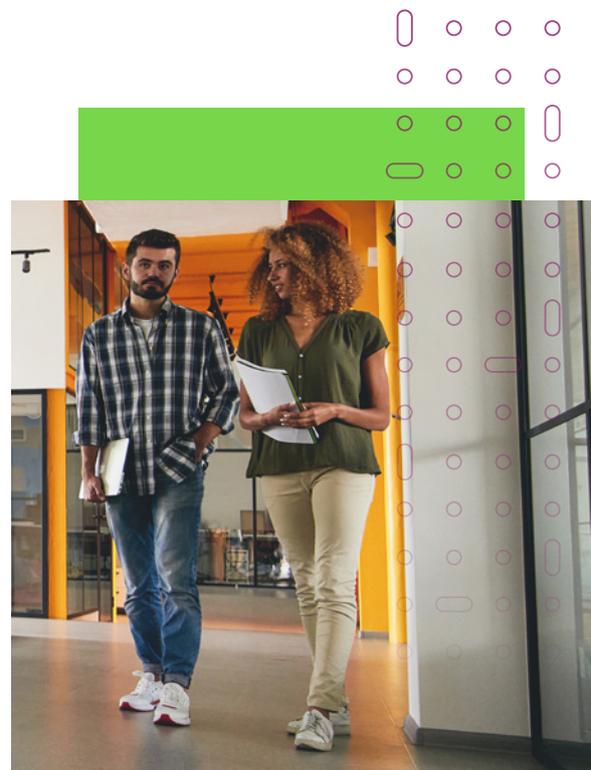
Asia-Pacific (APAC)

The Asia-Pacific (APAC) region is highly heterogeneous. It encompasses a variety of countries, each with unique socio-economic situations and distinct challenges. Common themes such as economic change, rising costs, digital transformation, and flexible working arrangements impact organizations in the APAC area in varied ways[1]. This heterogeneity translates into a wide range of area-specific challenges and opportunities that HR professionals must be equipped to address.

Essential capabilities for HR professionals in the APAC region include specialized HR expertise, robust people and data analytics, the facilitation of flexible people operations, commercial knowledge, automation of HR work, and critical thinking to support evidence-based practice.

The table shows the key competencies for the APAC region, the individual skills within these areas that HR professionals need to succeed, and how common each skill is within the APAC region compared to the global average.

Key Competencies and Skills

Applying Expertise and Technology
- ▶ **Applies functional expertise**
- ▼ **Operates job related technology**
- ▼ **Builds, designs, or creates new tools or systems**

Learning
- ▶ **Gathers information**

Critical Thinking
- ▶ **Analyzes information**
- ▶ **Critically evaluates**
- ▼ **Makes rational judgments**

Adaptability
- ▶ **Adapts to change**

Leadership
- ▶ **Supports and coaches others**

Commercial Thinking
- ▼ **Considers financial impact**

Building Relationships
- ▶ **Develops cross-functional awareness**

▼ Less common

▶ In line with global average

▲ More common

Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA)

Key Competencies and Skills

Planning and Organizing
▼ Sets objectives

Strategic Thinking
▶ Considers strategic vision

Applying Expertise and Technology
▼ Applies functional expertise

Critical Thinking
▶ Analyzes information

Collaboration
▶ Encourages diversity
▼ Accepts others

Ethics and Values
▶ Promotes environmental responsibility

Adaptability
▼ Adapts to change

Leadership
▶ Supports and coaches others

▼ Less common

▶ In line with global average

▲ More common

In the dynamic organizational landscape of the MENA region, HR professionals are faced with unique challenges and opportunities shaped by key trends such as digital transformation, the impact of social media, and the increasing prominence of freelancers and gig workers[3] who help to fill somewhat burdensome skills gaps. These trends stress the critical need for HR professionals to possess specialized skills that can help them effectively navigate and leverage these changes.

In this climate HR priorities for the region include strategic workforce planning, the optimization of productivity and financial performance, and the promotion of diversity and inclusion for all[4]. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, initiatives align with Vision 2030[5] to enhance female workforce participation through flexible work practices, while the UAE prioritizes sustainability efforts to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050[6].

The table shows the key competencies for the MENA region, the individual skills within these areas that HR professionals need to succeed, and how common each skill is within the MENA region compared with the global average.

United Kingdom and Ireland (UK&I)

Economic uncertainty, the rise of flexible and hybrid working models, and shifting workforce demographics are driving significant changes within organizations across the UK and Ireland[7]. Economic instability impacts both households and businesses, with the cost of living in Ireland notably higher than in the UK[8], placing economic change as the foremost driver of business transformation.

Simultaneously, the demand for flexible and hybrid working continues to surge,[9,10] necessitating HR expertise in managing remote and dispersed teams effectively[7]. Additionally, the rapid advancement of digital technology and AI integration requires HR professionals to be adept at leveraging these tools for data management and analysis. To thrive in this evolving environment, HR professionals must develop competencies in strategic workforce planning, technological adaptability, and innovative people management practices.

The table shows the key HR competencies for the UK&I region, the individual skills within these areas that HR professionals need to succeed, and how common each skill is within the UK&I region compared with the global average.

Key Competencies and Skills

Planning and Organizing
▶ Sets objectives

Strategic Thinking
▶ Considers strategic vision

Adaptability
▲ Adapts to change

Applying Expertise and Technology
▶ Applies functional expertise
▶ Operates job related technology

Initiative
▲ Focuses on self-development

Critical Thinking
▲ Analyzes information

Leadership
▼ Supports and coaches others

Dependability
▼ Complies with rules and regulations

▼ Less common

▶ In line with global average

▲ More common

European Union (EU)

Key Competencies and Skills

Communication
▲ Speaks clearly

Collaboration
▲ Understands others

Leadership
▲ Identifies potential
▼ Supports and coaches others

Dependability
▶ Complies with rules and regulations

Applying Expertise and Technology
▶ Applies functional expertise
▶ Operates job related technology

Critical Thinking
▶ Analyzes information

Adaptability
▲ Adapts to change

Building Relationships
▲ Manages conflict

Initiative
▲ Focuses on self-development

▼ Less common

▶ In line with global average

▲ More common

Human Resource professionals in the European Union (EU) face a unique set of challenges and opportunities driven by the region's integrated economic and labor market policies. Several key factors influence the necessity for specific HR skills in the EU. Economic integration demands that HR professionals manage a diverse and mobile workforce, necessitating strong communication, cultural competence and conflict management skills. The regulatory environment in the EU is characterized by stringent labor laws and compliance requirements, which necessitate a thorough understanding of legal standards.

Additionally, the rapid advancement of technology in HR management highlights the importance of digital literacy and data analysis skills. The emphasis on job mobility across the EU requires HR professionals to excel in recruitment and selection processes that cater to different regions. Furthermore, the EU's focus on lifelong learning and continuous professional development stresses the need for robust training and development skills[11]. Lastly, dynamic market conditions and frequent organizational changes within the EU necessitate strong change management capabilities.

The table shows the key HR competencies for the EU region, the individual skills within these areas that HR professionals need to succeed, and how common each skill is within the EU region compared with the global average.

United States (USA)

The current organizational landscape in the USA is shaped by technological breakthroughs and evolving regulatory requirements. Key areas of focus for HR professionals include mastering AI and data analytics for enhanced people decisions and balancing compliance with new regulations and existing corporate goals.

In this context, upskilling becomes crucial for staying competitive, particularly in integrating new technologies in people practices. Legal compliance and strategic workforce planning are essential for adapting to changes and driving organizational success. These skills are vital for addressing contemporary challenges and leveraging new opportunities[12,13].

The table shows the key HR competencies for the USA, the individual skills within these areas that HR professionals need to succeed, and how common each skill is within the USA compared with the global average.

Key Competencies and Skills

Applying Expertise and Technology
▲ Applies functional expertise

Critical Thinking
▲ Analyzes information

Collaboration
▶ Encourages diversity
▲ Demonstrates empathy

Building Relationships
▲ Manages conflict

Leadership
▲ Identifies potential
▶ Supports and coaches others

Planning and Organizing
▼ Sets objectives

Strategic Thinking
▼ Considers strategic vision

Adaptability
▲ Adapts to change

Dependability
▶ Complies with rules and regulations

Initiative
▶ Focuses on self-development

▼ Less common

▶ In line with global average

▲ More common

Conclusion

Across all regions several key competencies consistently emerge, accentuating the importance of adaptability, critical thinking, and functional expertise in HR while also revealing regional strengths that can be leveraged and gaps that need to be addressed. These insights can inform targeted upskilling strategies to address region-specific needs while also building a unified global HR framework that aligns core competencies across regions. By leveraging these findings, organizations can better align their HR strategies with local and global demands, ensuring both regional relevance and international competitiveness.

Understanding these regional differences and similarities is crucial to the development of tailored people strategies that meet specific needs and enhance the overall effectiveness of the HR function.

Globally, competencies in 'Critical Thinking,' 'Adaptability,' 'Leadership' and 'Applying Expertise and Technology' are universally recognized as essential for HR professionals. However, the data indicates that these skills are not as well-developed among HR professionals in some regions compared to others. Skills like 'applies functional expertise,' 'analyzes information' and 'supports and coaches others' are consistently important across regions but show potential for further enhancement among HR practitioners in areas such as APAC, MENA and Europe.

The table on the following page presents a comparison of key HR skills across various regions, identified through an extensive review of current literature.
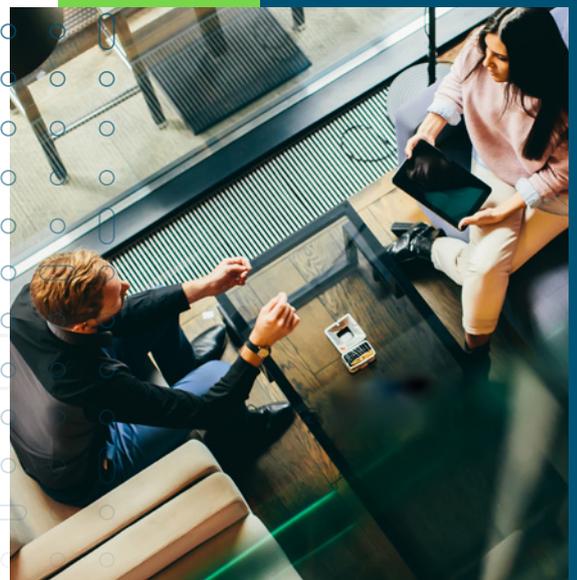
Key Competencies and Skills	APAC	MENA	UK&I	EU	USA
Applying Expertise and Technology					
Applies functional expertise	•	•	•	•	•
Operates job related technology	•		•	•	
Builds, designs, or creates new tools or systems	•				
Learning					
Gathers information	•				
Critical Thinking					
Analyzes information	•	•	•	•	•
Critically evaluates	•				
Makes rational judgments	•				
Adaptability					
Adapts to change	•	•	•	•	•
Leadership					
Supports and coaches others	•	•	•	•	•
Identifies potential				•	•
Commercial Thinking					
Considers financial impact	•				
Building Relationships					
Manages conflict				•	•
Develops cross-functional awareness	•				
Collaboration					
Encourages diversity		•			•
Understands others				•	
Accepts others		•			
Demonstrates empathy					•
Planning and Organizing					
Sets objectives		•	•		•
Strategic Thinking					
Considers strategic vision		•	•		•
Ethics and Values					
Promotes environmental responsibility		•			
Initiative					
Focuses on self-development			•	•	•
Dependability					
Complies with rules and regulations			•	•	•
Communication					
Speaks clearly				•	

1. APAC
Emphasis is placed on HR automation, commercial awareness, and data-driven decision-making, driven by the region's economic diversity and rapid digital transformation. Skills such as 'operates job related technology' and 'builds, designs, or creates new tools or systems' are critical.

2. MENA
The region's HR priorities include strategic workforce planning and sustainability, influenced by local economic policies and social changes. Key skills include 'sets objectives,' 'promotes environmental responsibility,' and 'adapts to change.'

3. UK & Ireland
Economic instability and the rise of hybrid work demand skills in strategic planning and technological adaptability. Skills such as 'considers strategic vision' and 'operates job related technology' are highlighted.

4. European Union
The regulatory environment and focus on job mobility necessitate strong compliance management and cultural competence. Essential skills include 'complies with rules and regulations' and 'understands others.'

5. USA
Technological breakthroughs and evolving regulatory requirements drive the need for mastering AI and data analytics, along with the ability to balance compliance with new regulations and existing corporate goals. Skills such as 'applies functional expertise,' 'adapts to change' and 'manages conflict' are vital.

This reveals a critical need for targeted upskilling and reskilling efforts, enabling HR professionals to close these gaps and better align with organizational needs. The global focus on professional development and continuous learning presents a timely opportunity for HR professionals to strengthen these competencies and increase their impact within their organizations.

By prioritizing the development of these key skills, HR professionals can enhance their strategic value and adapt to the evolving demands of a data-driven, technology-enabled workplace. This will position HR as a vital driver of organizational success in every region.

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