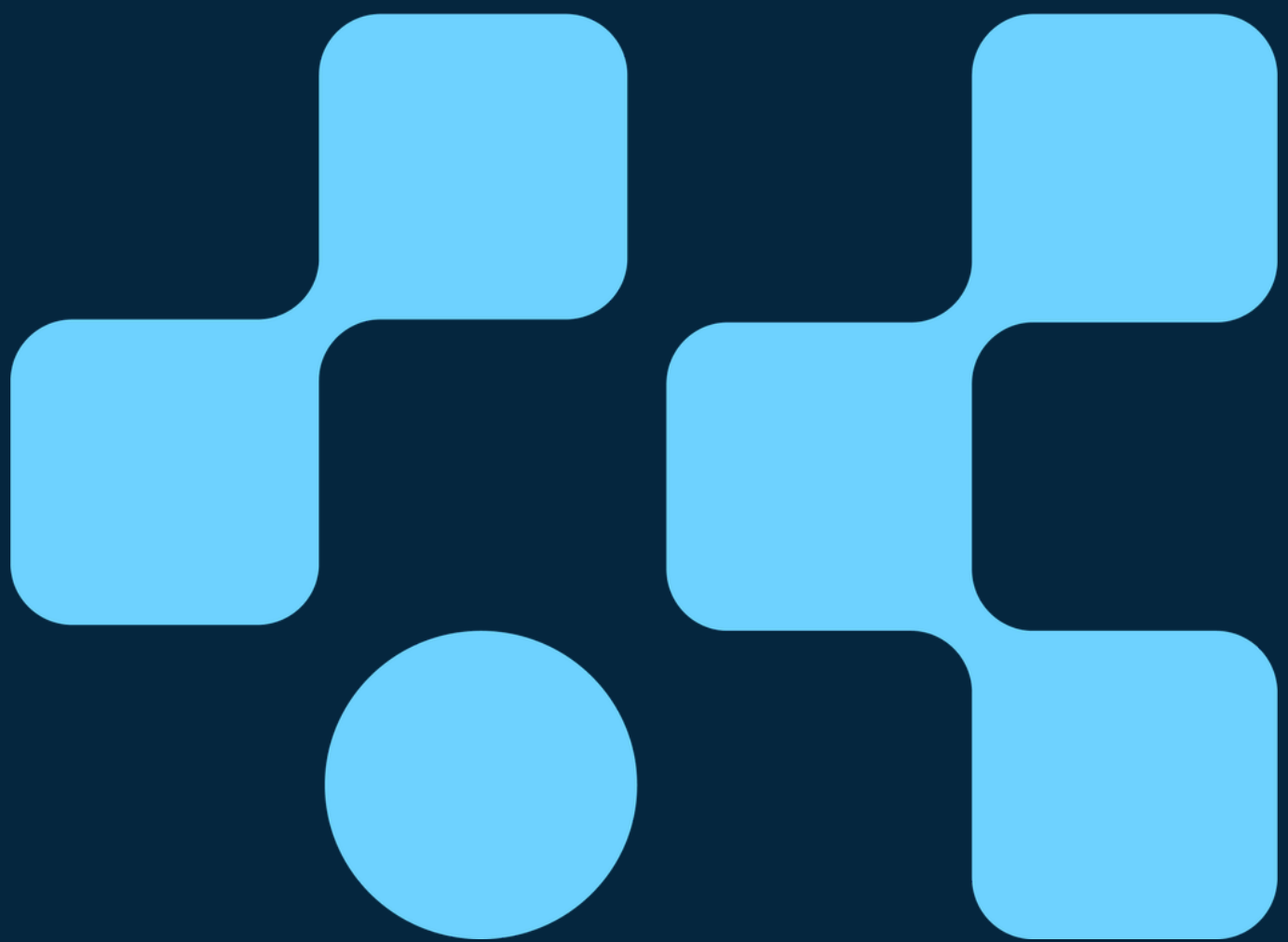




At the Intersection of Gender and Generation

Insights Toward Building a NextGen Fit Industry

Second Edition NextGen Study, 2026

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About our Study

In our industry, we are always seeking to become better and to attract, retain and advance the very best talent. We aim to shatter barriers and ensure that equitable opportunities exist for all to contribute and grow. At LEAD Network, our mission is to attract, retain and advance all women in the Consumer Goods and Retail industry, creating sustainable business value. Research reports like this can help us pursue our mission, and enable women and organisations to thrive.

Why NextGen?

Evidence shows there is a clear intersectional link between the needs of women and the needs of NextGen talent. Meaning, if we can solve for the needs of NextGen, we will also solve the needs of women. Progress for one is progress for all.

Background

We conducted this study - the second edition of our NextGen research - to deepen understanding of what matters to younger talent in our industry. Having surveyed NextGens within and beyond our industry about how work is perceived, we present insights on how companies in our industry can effectively attract, retain and advance talent for years to come. Our findings also cover AI and technology, gaining the perspectives of this generation on the industry's readiness to adapt. For the purposes of this research, we define "NextGens" as talent aged between 25-35.

3 Themes

The NextGen workforce is ready to accelerate, but the way we work has not yet caught up. Across the industry, this generation is ambitious, motivated to grow, and eager to contribute. Yet too often, they move through systems where opportunity isn't visible.

NextGens are asking for work that works better.

At the same time, a new frontier is unfolding. As AI and digital transformation reshape the way work gets done, NextGens are expected to adapt at speed, but are calling out that organisations are not ready or equipping them to succeed.

This is a defining moment for our industry. The organisations that act now will not only meet the expectations of NextGen talent, but will unlock their full potential, shaping a stronger, more inclusive, and future-ready workplace for all.



01 Growth

the invisible runway



02 Fit

the culture gap



03 Readiness

the AI deficit



Growth: The Invisible Runway

01

The ambition exists

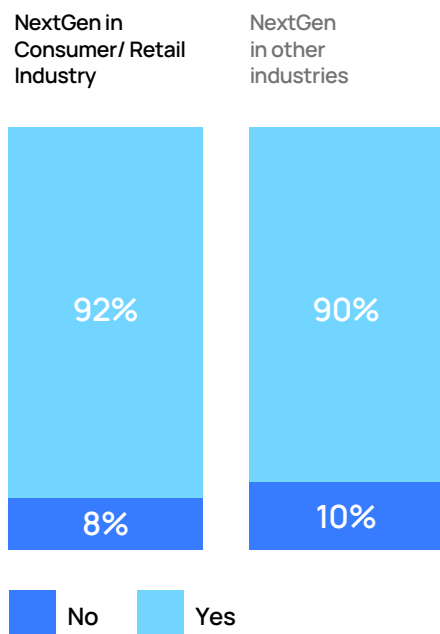
NextGens are ready to grow – and they want to do it within our industry.

In Consumer Goods and Retail, **92%** of NextGens say they want to grow their careers, slightly more than those outside of the industry, challenging the perception that younger talent is less committed to long-term progression. NextGens are ready to invest in their future within the industry. **They are looking for organisations that will invest in them in return.**

Encouragingly, this ambition is being met with growing confidence in the industry itself. The number of NextGens who say they would continue working in Consumer Goods and Retail jumped **from 28% to 45%** in just two years, signalling a meaningful shift in how the industry is perceived. While challenges remain, this momentum reflects a clear direction of travel.

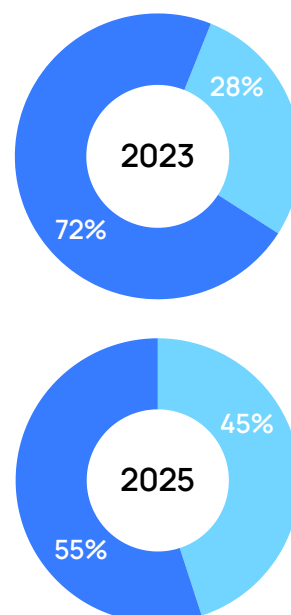
NextGen talent is increasingly choosing to build their future here. Safeguarding this future talent pipeline requires that conditions for growth are consistently delivered.

I want to grow my career at my current workplace



Industry attractiveness

Would pursue other industries (Dark Blue) | Would continue working in CPG /Retail (Light Blue)





Growth: The Invisible Runway

01

The path to growth is less clear

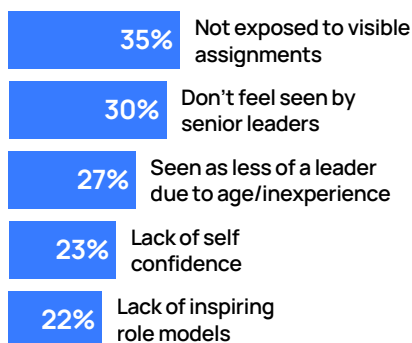
While ambition is strong, access is still uneven. Growth is limited by visibility and opportunity. Many NextGens in our industry report barriers that are structural rather than personal: **35%** say they are not exposed to visible assignments, **30%** do not feel seen by senior leaders, and **27%** feel they are viewed as less capable of leadership due to age or inexperience. These challenges are compounded by a lack of role models, making progression feel uncertain even for those who are ready to advance.

At the same time, the solutions are clear and actionable. Nearly half of respondents point to leadership development programmes (**48%**) and mentoring (**48%**) as critical enablers of growth, while **41%** call for open application processes for critical projects.

When organisations make opportunity visible, structured, and accessible, growth can accelerate. Without that clarity, ambition goes unrealized.

Barriers to growth

NextGen in Consumer/Retail Industry

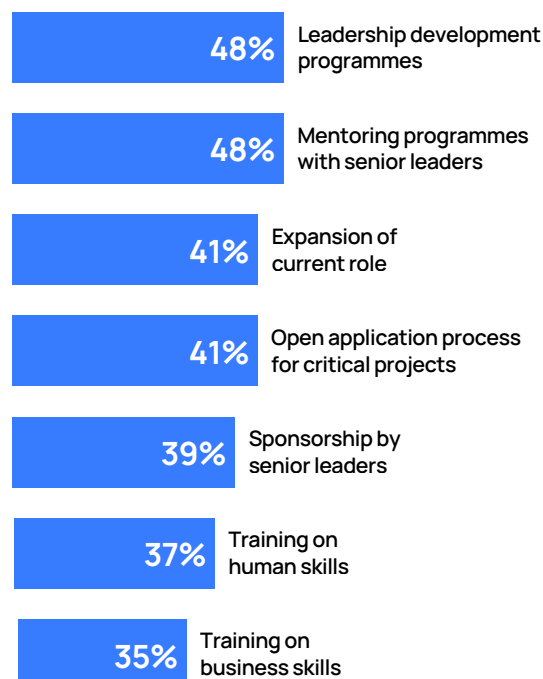


NextGen in other industries



What NextGens say they need to overcome these barriers

NextGen in Consumer/Retail Industry





Growth: The Invisible Runway

01

NextGen Voices

“ Opportunities to grow within the company have declined overall; not even lateral or up.

“ Not many opportunities remain.

“ Lack of line manager's sponsorship.

“ Few opportunities to grow in activities and career as there is no budget to invest in my team.

“ Unclear career planning and growth projection at lower levels in the organisation.



Fit: The Culture Gap

02

NextGen culture fit lags behind other industries

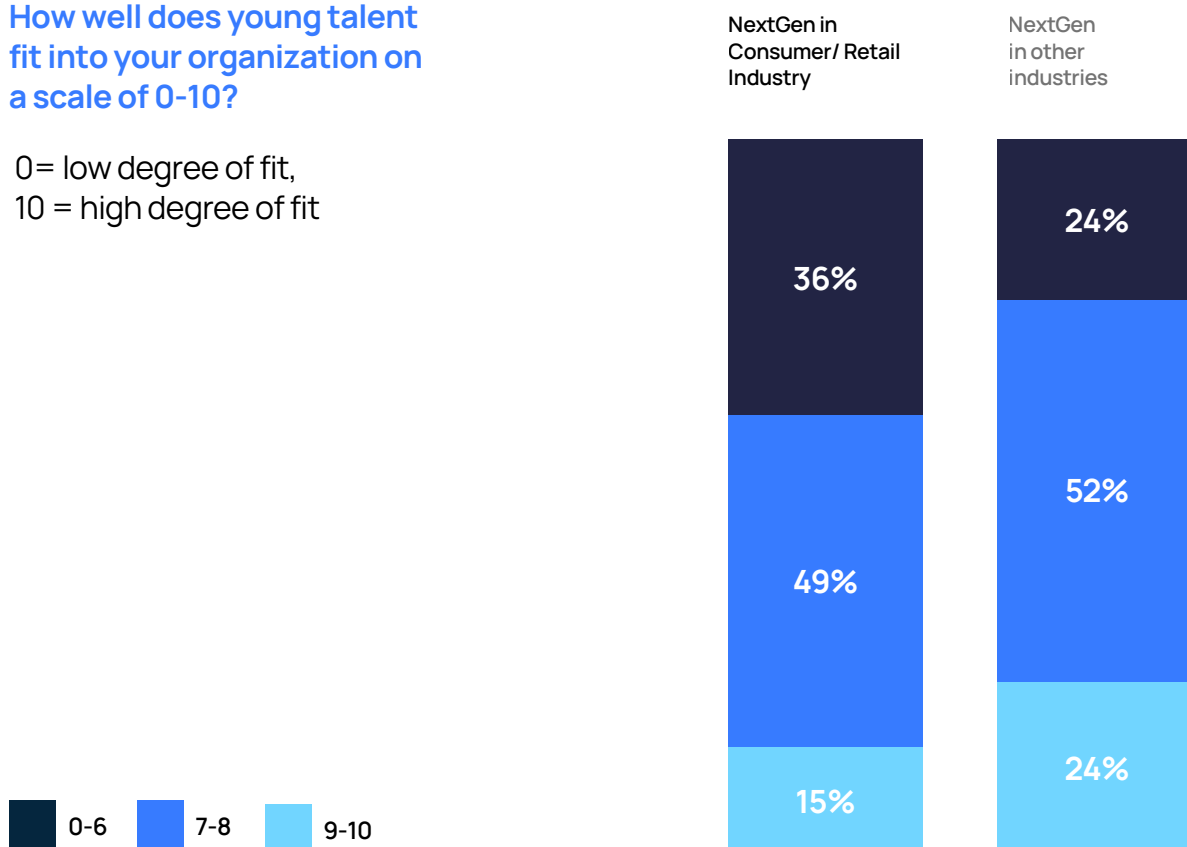
Culture is experienced differently within vs. outside of our industry.

36% of NextGens in Consumer Goods and Retail report that their organisation is not yet fit for young talent, vs only **24%** reported by NextGens in other industries; highlighting a gap in how culture is experienced within our industry.

This difference points to a broader reality: culture is shaped by how individuals access opportunity, navigate expectations, and experience the day-to-day environment.

How well does young talent fit into your organization on a scale of 0-10?

0 = low degree of fit,
10 = high degree of fit





Fit: The Culture Gap

02

Culture is shaped in the day to day

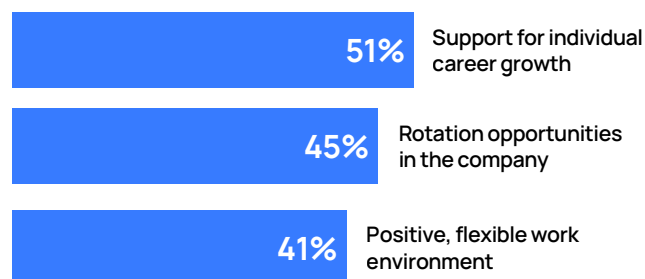
NextGens are clear about the workplaces they want to be part of. Support for individual career growth is mentioned by **over half** of all respondents. And **45%** of respondents point to structured rotational opportunities.

And a positive, flexible work environment is identified as a priority, with **41%** of respondents selecting it as one of the most important factors shaping how work is experienced.

This highlights that culture is not abstract or symbolic. The required fixes are tangible, clear, and systemic. With these conditions in place, culture can support engagement and retention. Where they are not, the experience becomes fragmented.

What is needed to make your organisation more NextGen fit?

NextGen in Consumer/Retail Industry





Fit: The Culture Gap

02

NextGen Voices

“ Leaders need to champion a personal development culture.

“ We need stronger onboarding and career development programmes with defined milestones.

“ Valuing different leadership styles, especially those that empower others and lead through empathy rather than assertiveness or self-promotion.

“ Lead by example: senior leaders should show that it is OK to leave earlier to pick up the kids.



Readiness: The AI Deficit

03

The AI readiness gap is widening

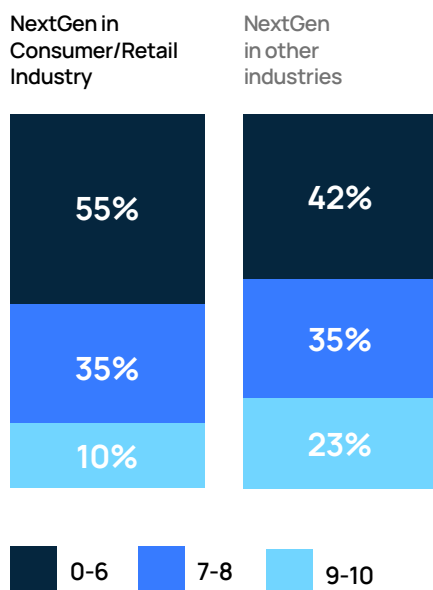
The transition to AI-enabled work is already underway, but NextGens highlight a readiness gap within our industry. **55%** of NextGens in Consumer Goods and Retail feel their employers are already behind with AI, compared to just **42%** in other industries, signalling a clear gap in perceived industry readiness.

This gap is reinforced when looking at how supported NextGens feel in preparing for AI. In our industry, **55%** rate their organisations as poorly equipped to support them, compared to **44%** outside the industry, further underscoring a difference not just in adaptation, but in the experience of that transition.

Taken together, this data points to a broader reality: AI readiness is not only about adopting new technologies, but about how effectively organisations enable their people to keep pace. Today, NextGens are navigating this shift while feeling unsupported - raising important questions about the preparedness of both organisations and their workforce for what comes next.

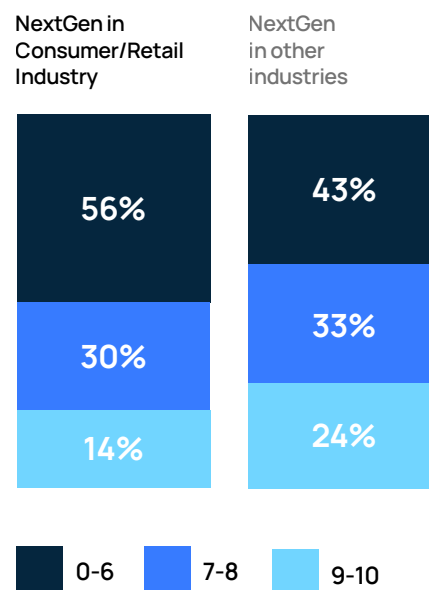
How well are employers adapting to the use of AI?

0 = not adapting well
10 = adapting very well



How supportive are your companies in preparing for AI in the workplace?

0 = unsupportive
10 = highly supportive





Readiness: The AI Deficit

03

The capability gap is clear

If readiness is lagging, capability is even further behind. **66%** of NextGens in Consumer Goods and Retail report feeling ill-equipped to integrate AI into their roles, compared to just **35%** outside the industry, highlighting a significant capability gap.

75% of NextGens call for more AI training and upskilling, with **62%** calling for greater access to AI tools and **57%** highlighting the need for dedicated time to experiment with these tools.

And when asked what skills matter most to NextGens, they cite **AI and machine learning basics, data analysis and literacy, and digital project management** as critical capabilities for career growth.

While organisations in our industry have the ambition to build future-ready workforces, their enablement systems are not yet fully in place. Closing this gap can help to translate technological change into workforce capability, and ultimately, organisational performance.



Readiness: The AI Deficit

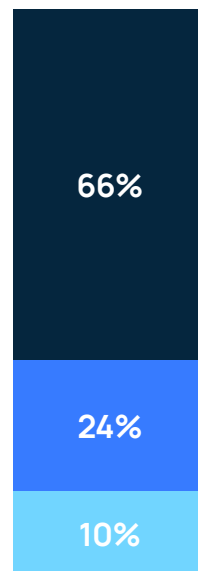
03

How equipped do NextGens feel to integrate AI into their responsibilities?

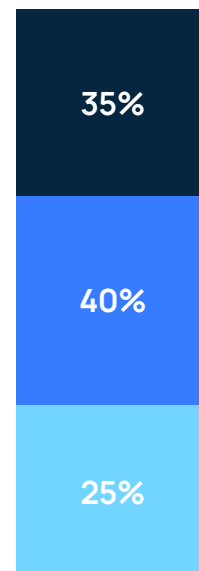
0 = unequipped
10 = well equipped



NextGen in
Consumer/Retail
Industry

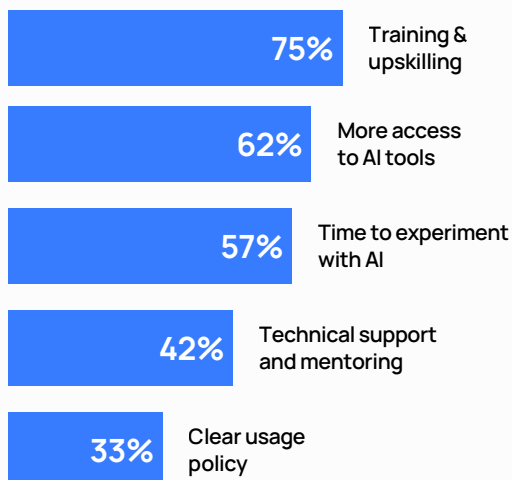


NextGen
in other
industries



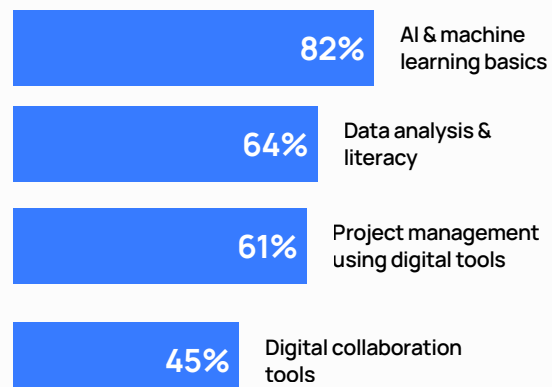
What kind of support do you need to become better equipped?

NextGen in Consumer/Retail Industry



What are the most important digital skills requiring development?

NextGen in Consumer/Retail Industry



Country-level Differences

Qualitative highlights

While expectations of growth, culture, and future skills are broadly consistent across markets, the experience of NextGen talent varies slightly by country.



The **UK** consistently stands out as more advanced, with stronger perceptions of workplace experience, greater confidence in career opportunities, and higher levels of organisational readiness for AI adoption.



In contrast, **France** shows more constrained perceptions, with lower assessments of workplace experience and readiness, indicating a less consistent environment for NextGen talent.



Across **Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands**, results are more closely aligned with the overall benchmark, with no single market consistently outperforming or underperforming across all dimensions.

Solutions

NextGen talent have clear ideas on solutions, and how to make our industry even more future-fit.



01 Growth: addressing the invisible runway

This study has shown that NextGen talent is ambitious. In fact, **92%** of respondents in Consumer Goods and Retail want to grow in their current workplace. Progress requires nurturing potential, building capability, widening access to key assignments and increasing visibility among senior leaders. To make your organisation more NextGen fit, consider the following:

- **Curate access to senior leaders** - e.g. through targeted 1:1 coaching, mentoring and sponsorship. Experiment with having NextGens shadow senior leaders for a few days, and participate in key meetings and decision-making. These types of practical exchanges can provide valuable learnings for both leaders and NextGens talent.
- **Introduce open nominations** - for development programmes and critical assignments.
- **Adapt decision-making protocols** - when allocating stretch assignments and cross-functional strategic projects, ensure that NextGen talent is pro-actively targeted.
- **Create pathways, not just programmes** - one-off training programmes will not retain your NextGen talent. It is important to demonstrate routes to progression, and to connect individual experiences, learning & proficiency to career development.
- **Showcase career lattice role models** - leverage internal communications channels to showcase individuals who have moved through your organisation in interesting ways, by traversing functions rather than a traditional linear career ladder. Within our industry, there are many examples of lattice career movement - this is a quick win!

Solutions Cont.



02 Fit: filling the culture gap

Workplace experience matters. Supporting individual career growth and creating a positive, flexible work environment are the strongest recommendations NextGens have for ensuring a NextGen-fit future. They express a desire to see their CEOs prioritising the development of outcome-oriented, flexible workplaces. Consider the following solutions:

- **Introduce a NextGen rotational programme** – create the cultural conditions for NextGens to gain breadth of experience, by spending time in different areas of the business alongside technical experts.
- **Involve NextGen in designing flexible work** – e.g. through surveys, focus groups or a cross-functional sprint team focused on redesigning workflow. Include NextGen talent on site visits or digital infrastructure projects to appraise NextGen-friendliness of the working environment. It's vital to ensure the next generation of talent is involved in reimagining how roles are designed, how work gets done, and how organisations can enable a culture of high performance that also supports family life.



03 Readiness: tackling the AI gap

The future of work will depend on stronger digital confidence. This report shows that many NextGens do not feel their companies are adapting well to AI, and they do not feel equipped to integrate AI into their daily responsibilities. Consider the following ways to plug these gaps in order to build digital capability for the future:

- **Invest in training and upskilling** – target resources to ensure the next generation of leaders have the required capabilities in AI, machine learning, data analysis, digital project management, and digital collaboration skills. But remember that AI literacy is built through use, not coursework - upskilling requires hands-on, role-specific practice.
- **Facilitate collective experimentation** - peer collaboration is the strongest predictor of AI skills confidence and reduced job insecurity - even stronger than formal training programmes*. So be intentional about creating structured opportunities to learn together such as: dedicated learning circles, peer-mentoring, team-based AI practice sessions, a workplace sandbox, and company hackathons. Proactive enablement will propel your organisation into the future.

*Zhang et al., Frontiers in Psychology Vol. 16, Dec. 2025 (DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1700129)

Company Case Study



Designed, Not Default: Lidl Bulgaria's Blueprint for NextGen Talent and AI Adoption



Since winning 'Best in Class (Retail)' at the 2024 LEAD Network Awards, Lidl Bulgaria has continued to lead by example on inclusive operations. With Next Gen talent and AI adoption top of mind for so many in retail and CPG, we asked their CEO, Milena Dragiiska, to outline some of the practical steps the company has taken over the last 12 months, which have seen some impressive results.

Step 1: Living Up to NextGen Expectations

Rather than relying on generalised data about what young talent wants from their employee experience, Lidl Bulgaria conducted its own annual research to gain direct insights from both current employees and prospective NextGen talent. The data was clear. Gen Z employees ranked **attractive salary (92%)**, **work-life balance (90%)**, and **professional training and development (88%)** as their top three priorities. With a commitment to #DoingNotTrying, Lidl Bulgaria used these insights to design informed, structural solutions to close expectation gaps.

Step 2: Turning Insight Into Infrastructure

With a clear, data-driven brief, Lidl Bulgaria developed an offering to address each of the stated NextGen expectations. These carefully curated offerings were packaged up into a **brand-new apprenticeship programme in Stores & Logistics**. Aimed at young talent aged 16–18, the apprenticeship has been designed with the following components built in:

- 70% of a regular salary, plus benefits
- Flexible working options
- Structured onboarding
- Mentorship provision
- Online peer community
- Bridging to longer term career pathways

Step 3: Measuring the Effect

As with any other product launch, the Lidl Bulgaria team were focused on measuring the impact of the new apprenticeship rollout. So far, early indications tell a positive story:

- 98% employee Net Promoter Score in 2025
- 10% improvement in retention
- 55% more applications year-over-year into 2026

Company Case Study Cont.

Going Beyond a 'One Size Fits All' Approach

Fuelled by their success with improving the NextGen experience overall, Lidl decided to go one step further. Recognising that not all talent has the same starting point, the company set an explicit ambition to become a career destination of choice for **Roma youth** entering the workforce. As one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Europe, the Roma community continues to face challenges and instances of discrimination that can significantly limit individual prospects, organisational talent pipelines, and societal progress. Refusing to accept the status quo, Lidl Bulgaria set about designing targeted solutions in response to this often overlooked, NextGen talent challenge. As a result, they introduced the following:

- **Open days** held at both their HQ and logistics sites
- Partnering on **annual leadership camps** for 80 Roma youth, with interactive sessions & content
- Funding 15 targeted **university scholarships** each year

Elsewhere, initiatives like **Career Up**, **CEO for a Day**, and a highly sought-after **internship programme**, demonstrate their commitment to building two-way meaningful engagement in place of a traditional one-way recruitment funnel. This is what happens when ambitions are realised through co-creative structural design; retail becomes genuinely attractive to a 16-year-old considering a career pathway.

AI Adoption; Same Playbook

Lidl Bulgaria's approach to AI adoption mirrors the approach they take with nurturing talent; intentional by design, practical, and embedded into operational structures. For example:

- **AI simulators** are built into to their Sales Manager training and daily workflow
- **AI-dedicated episodes** of their educational videocast '21st Century Skills', which have generated over 500,000 views
- **Hands-on AI sessions** enable existing and prospective employees to experiment with AI in the context of work

By curating opportunities for staff to collectively experiment and learn with AI in the context of daily operations, the company is scaffolding the process of growth and transformation. Bravo!

A Bright Future Ahead

The Retail sector has always offered a compelling career prospect for NextGen talent: secure income, international opportunities, real-world problems to solve, and the ability to make a positive impact on communities. The challenge has never been about the industry itself or a shortage of talent, but rather, how organisations are set up to engage the future workforce. Yet Lidl Bulgaria has demonstrated what's possible when we intentionally redesign access and progression architecture. As Milena puts it herself: **"Gen Z can achieve remarkable things with us. Our mission as a sector is to win them for Retail"**. We couldn't agree more. By reframing work as a product with the aim of attracting, delighting and retaining the full spectrum of customers, the sector's future really does look bright!

Research Methodology

This study was designed to amplify the voice of NextGen talent and provide a clear, evidence-based view of their experiences, expectations, and barriers to growth within Consumer Goods and Retail, comparing this data with the experience of NextGens outside of our industry to provide more richness.

Insights were gathered through a self-administered survey, delivered via mobile application and web link, enabling participants to share their perspectives in a direct, accessible, and anonymous way.

The research combines the lived experiences of LEAD Network members with external benchmarks, ensuring the findings reflect both the reality within the industry and how it compares more broadly.

The internal sample includes **146** LEAD Network members aged 25–35, representing the next generation of talent across the industry, complemented by an external sample of **500** professionals across five European markets (UK, Germany, the Netherlands, France and Italy) from diverse industries like Hospitality, Agriculture, IT/Technology, Consulting, Pharma, Financial Services, Construction & Real Estate. While the benchmark includes a broad mix of industries, IT/Technology represents the largest share of respondents, but not the majority.

Data for the external audience was collected in October of 2025, while the internal fieldwork was conducted between September and November 2025. Together, this approach ensures the findings are not only robust and comparable, but anchored in LEAD Network's vision of creating workplaces where everyone can grow and contribute, and where organisations thrive.

Key Contributors



Sarah McGowan

Strategic Research & Learning Advisor, LEAD Network

Sarah is passionate about unlocking human potential and transforming organisations from the inside out. For over 25 years, she has partnered with leaders to build thriving cultures and develop people who create value as they grow. During her time as Senior Vice President at Ahold Delhaize, she led global talent initiatives for 400,000+ associates across 19 brands, reinforcing the power of connecting people to purpose at scale.

Sarah is the co-founder of [The Talent Project](#), a consultancy dedicated to delivering talent wins through evidence-based methods. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Executive Leadership at Clemson University, building on her MBA from Boston College, and Masters of Human Resources from Michigan State University, and is a Lecturer at Northeastern University.



Jodeine Wheatcroft

Learning & Research Consultant LEAD Network

Jodeine (she/her) is an Independent Consultant and certified Employee Experience Designer who is passionate about co-creating environments that enable people to do their best work. By reframing work as a product, she partners with organisations to remove friction and unlock competitive advantage.

Over the last 5 years, Jodeine has been working across FMCG and other industries to support organisational transformation. Prior to that, she enjoyed a successful 15 year career in the UK higher education sector, which included spearheading a national strategy to drive the adoption of evidence-based practice. She holds a Masters in Leadership and Management, and draws on experience in workplace inclusion, employee experience, participatory approaches to change, research-informed practice, and learning & development.



With gratitude to the team at Lidl Bulgaria for sharing their inspiring case study with the LEAD Network community.





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