ATTENSI

## From Motivation to Mastery:

# The Science of Building a Skilled Workforce

New research into what actually drives skill development and performance at work

Trond Aas, CEO, Attensi

# Unlocking performance through practice, progress, and the motivation loop

**We often talk about motivation as if it's something employees either have or don't have.**
In reality, that hasn't been my experience.

People come to work motivated. They want to do well. They want to improve. They want to feel capable. So the more important question is not how do we motivate people.

**It's this:**
**Why does that motivation break? And what can we do to sustain it?**
What we see again and again — across industries, roles, and markets — is that motivation doesn't disappear on its own. It fades when the environment fails to support it. In particular, poor training plays a central role.

**Training that is:**
- irrelevant to the real job
- passive rather than practical
- disconnected from day-to-day challenges

does more than fail to engage — it actively de-motivates. It creates a gap between effort and improvement.

**People invest time, but don't feel themselves getting better.**
And when that happens, motivation drops — quickly. This research is important because it reframes the problem.

**Motivation isn't missing. It's being lost.**
Our latest data findings show that employees are already motivated — but that motivation depends on whether they can:
- practice
- improve
- and see their progress

When those conditions are in place, motivation grows. When they are not, it declines.

**The challenge is not to create motivation from scratch — but to design environments where it can thrive.**

**This paper explores exactly that:**
· why motivation breaks
· how it connects to practice and confidence
· and what organizations can do to fix it

**Because when people feel themselves improving, everything changes:**
- performance improves
- confidence grows
- and motivation sustains itself

Although much of the report is what we expected from our hypothesis – there are some surprises too.
The biggest surprise being that a significant portion of the workforce would choose training over a 5% pay rise. We didn't see that coming. What it tells us is that people want to be skilled. They understand the value.

**TROND AAS,**
CEO, ATTENSI


**41% overall would choose better training to improve their skills over a 5% pay increase with no further training.**


**Among 25–34 year olds, a majority (54%) chose training over better pay.**

## Workplace training is often framed as a motivation problem. If employees cared more, training would work.

**This research tells a different story.**

### Frontline employees are already motivated — but that motivation is fragile.


**86%** of workers say they are motivated in their current role


**95%** say getting better at something is motivating in itself.

### When workers were asked to choose between a 5% pay rise or better training, the results were striking:


**41%** of all workers chose better training over a pay increase


Among 25–34 year olds, a majority **(54%)** chose training over pay

Despite employees possessing the motivation to improve, performance and skill development across organizations still largely fall short.



The Original Hypothesis:

# Motivation as the Missing Link in training success

**This research began with a widely held assumption:**
Motivation is the missing link in onboarding and training.

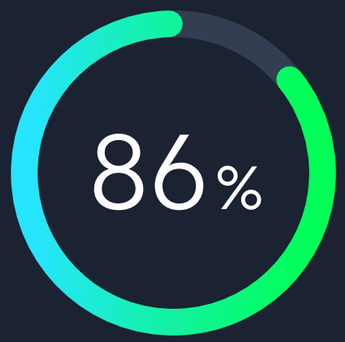
**The idea being:**

- employees fail to engage
- therefore they fail to practice
- therefore they fail to improve

**But we set out to test a more precise question:**
Is motivation actually missing, or is it being lost?

# What the Research Reveals: Motivation Already Exists

The data clearly shows that employees are not disengaged by default.




**say they are motivated at work**


**say improving at something is inherently motivating**

**At the same time:** 80% say they already have access to the information they need
**Yet:** 61% say that information does not translate into feeling skilled or confident

**This is the disconnect.**
Motivation exists ⟶ but it is not being converted into capability.

# The Real Problem: Motivation Decay

Motivation is not fixed — it is highly responsive to experience.

**It grows when people:**

⟶ practice regularly
⟶ see clear progress
⟶ feel more capable

And it collapses when they don't.

**The research shows:**

**77%** say they cannot master skills without practice
**74%** had to practice repeatedly before feeling good at their job
**65%** say most training focuses on information rather than hands-on practice

**This creates a predictable pattern:**

1. People start motivated
2. Training delivers knowledge, not experience
3. Progress is limited or invisible
4. Confidence doesn't build
5. Motivation drops


**say they are less likely to continue when they don't feel progress**

Motivation doesn't disappear because people don't care.
It disappears because effort stops leading to progress.

# The COM-B Model, Revisited

The COM-B model is a widely used behavioral framework that explains how behavior change happens. It shows that for any behavior to occur, three conditions must be met:

**Capability** ⟶ having the knowledge and skill to perform the task
**Opportunity** ⟶ having the time, environment, and conditions to apply it
**Motivation** ⟶ having the desire, confidence, or incentive to act

If any one of these is missing, behavior breaks down. In theory, all three matter equally. But in practice, the research shows something different:

**Motivation is the most fragile component, and the first to collapse, even when information is available and training is provided.**

**Even when:**
· capability exists (information is available)
· opportunity exists (training is provided)

Behavior fails to change if motivation drops.
Performance still breaks down if motivation is not sustained.

**And motivation drops fastest when:**
progress isn't visible ⟶ **93%** say seeing progress motivates them to improve
confidence isn't building ⟶ **91%** say confidence keeps them practicing

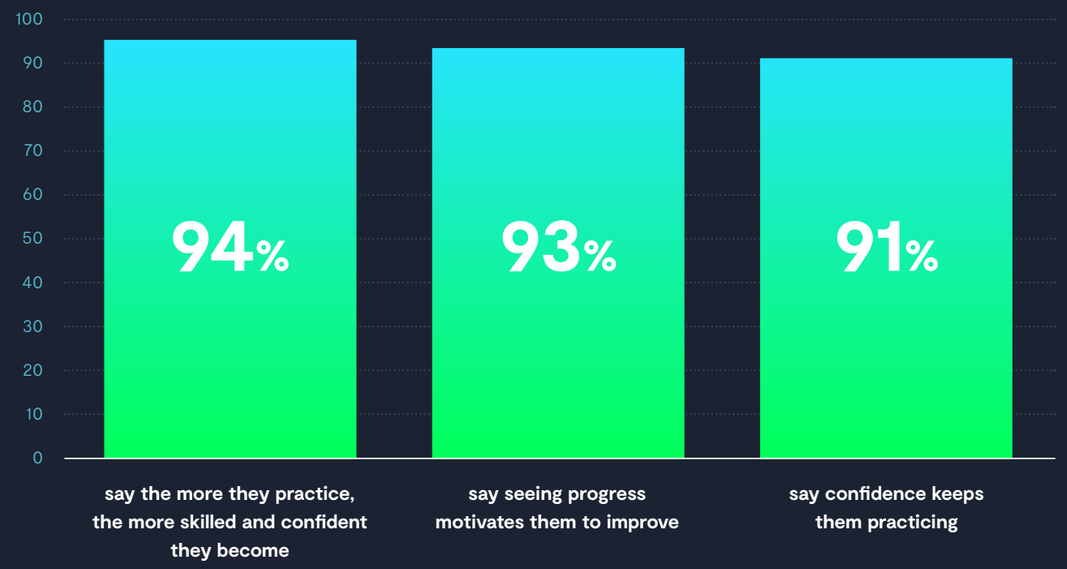
# The Motivation Loop: How Skills Actually Develop


The data reveals a consistent behavioral system:

Practice ⟶ Progress ⟶ Confidence ⟶ Motivation ⟶ more Practice

**Each stage is strongly supported by the findings:**

This is not theoretical — it is observable and measurable.



**When the loop is working:**
motivation increases naturally ⟶ practice stops
effort compounds over time ⟶ learning stalls

**When it breaks:**

## People stay motivated when they can feel themselves getting better.

### Why Training Competes with Pay

One of the most revealing findings in the study challenges a common assumption: that financial reward is always the strongest motivator.

**When workers were asked to choose between a 5% pay rise or better training, the results were striking:**

- 41% of all workers chose better training over a pay increase
- Among 25–34 year olds, a majority — 54% — chose training over pay

This is the only age group where training outright beats compensation.

**This matters because this group represents:**
- early-career employees
- those actively building skills
- those most likely to shape the future workforce

It signals a shift in how workers think about value.
For a significant portion of the workforce, capability is currency.

The data also reinforces ***why.***

- 71% say they improve skills primarily to feel more confident and capable — not for rewards or promotions
- 73% say training that builds confidence would improve their experience of work

Pay still matters — it remains the top stated motivator for performance overall.

**But thisresearch suggests something more nuanced:**
Pay motivates performance in the moment but skills build long-term earning power, confidence, and career security. In that context, better training is seen as an investment in a better future rather than a perk.

**For employers, this presents a clear opportunity:**
When pay is fixed, training becomes the most powerful lever for motivation, retention, and performance.

### Why Traditional Training Falls Short

**The research highlights key gaps:**

1. **Too much information, not enough practice**
   65% say training focuses more on information than hands-on experience.
2. **Limited opportunities to practice**
   60% say they need more practice, not more information.
3. **Lack of visible progress**
   77% would put in more effort if they could clearly see benefits.
4. **Confidence is not being built**
   73% say training that builds confidence would improve their work experience.
5. **Training doesn't fit the reality of work**
   Time pressure and busy shifts are consistently cited as barriers

**The result:**
Knowledge accumulates ⟶ but capability does not.

# The Role of Training: Designing for Motivation

This fundamentally changes how we should think about training. Motivation is not something employees either have or don't have. It is something that is created through experience.

**For training to work, it must:**

⟶ Enable repeated practice
⟶ Make progress visible
⟶ Build confidence through safe repetition
⟶ Provide real-time feedback
⟶ Feel relevant and engaging

**The data reinforces this:**


**90% say they learn better when training is enjoyable**


**84% say real-time feedback builds confidence**


**84% say safe environments help them learn faster.**

Motivation becomes an output of good design ⟶ not a prerequisite for it

# Why Game-based Simulation Training Works

**Game-based simulation training works because it directly addresses the core constraint identified in the research:** the lack of meaningful, repeatable practice.

**It allows employees to:**

- practice realistic scenarios before facing them in real life
- make decisions under pressure in a safe environment
- learn through repetition without operational risk

This is critical in frontline environments, where real-world mistakes are costly and opportunities to practice are limited.

**The data strongly supports this need:**

- 84% say practicing in a safe environment helps them learn faster
- 71% feel more confident after practicing in roleplay scenarios first
- 66% want more realistic practice scenarios in training

Simulation solves the opportunity gap in COM-B — creating space to practice where it otherwise wouldn't exist.
Game based simulation training then ensures that practice actually happens.

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**Mechanics such as:**

→ levels and progression
→ streaks and challenges
→ feedback and scoring

create the motivation to repeat, improve, and continue.

**Together, simulation and gamification do two things:**

1. Make practice possible (simulation)
2. Make practice sustained (gamification)

Simulation builds capability.
Game-based training sustains motivation.
Together, they keep the loop turning.

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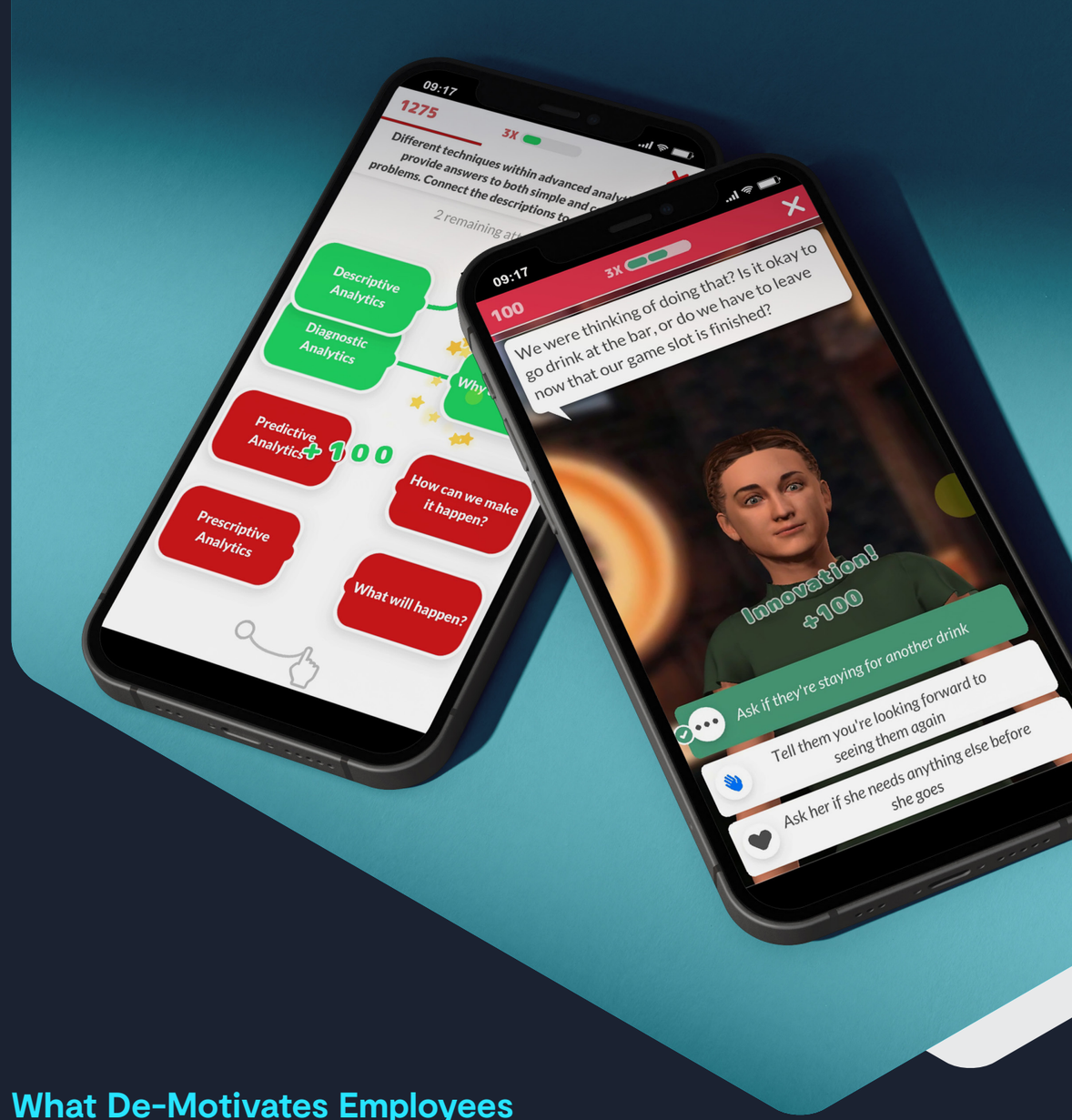
**This is why:**

- 64% say simulation-based training would motivate them more than traditional methods

Because it makes improvement possible, visible, and repeatable.




## What De-Motivates Employees

Motivation drops when the loop breaks.

**The research shows consistent disruptors:**

No practice → no progress
No feedback → no confidence
No relevance → low engagement
No time → no opportunity

All of these map directly back to failures in training design, not employee intent.

# Conclusion

**The key insight from this research is simple:**
Employees are not waiting to be motivated — they are waiting to get better.

Motivation is not the cause of performance.
**It is the result of progress.**

**When people:**

→ practice regularly
→ see improvement
→ feel more capable

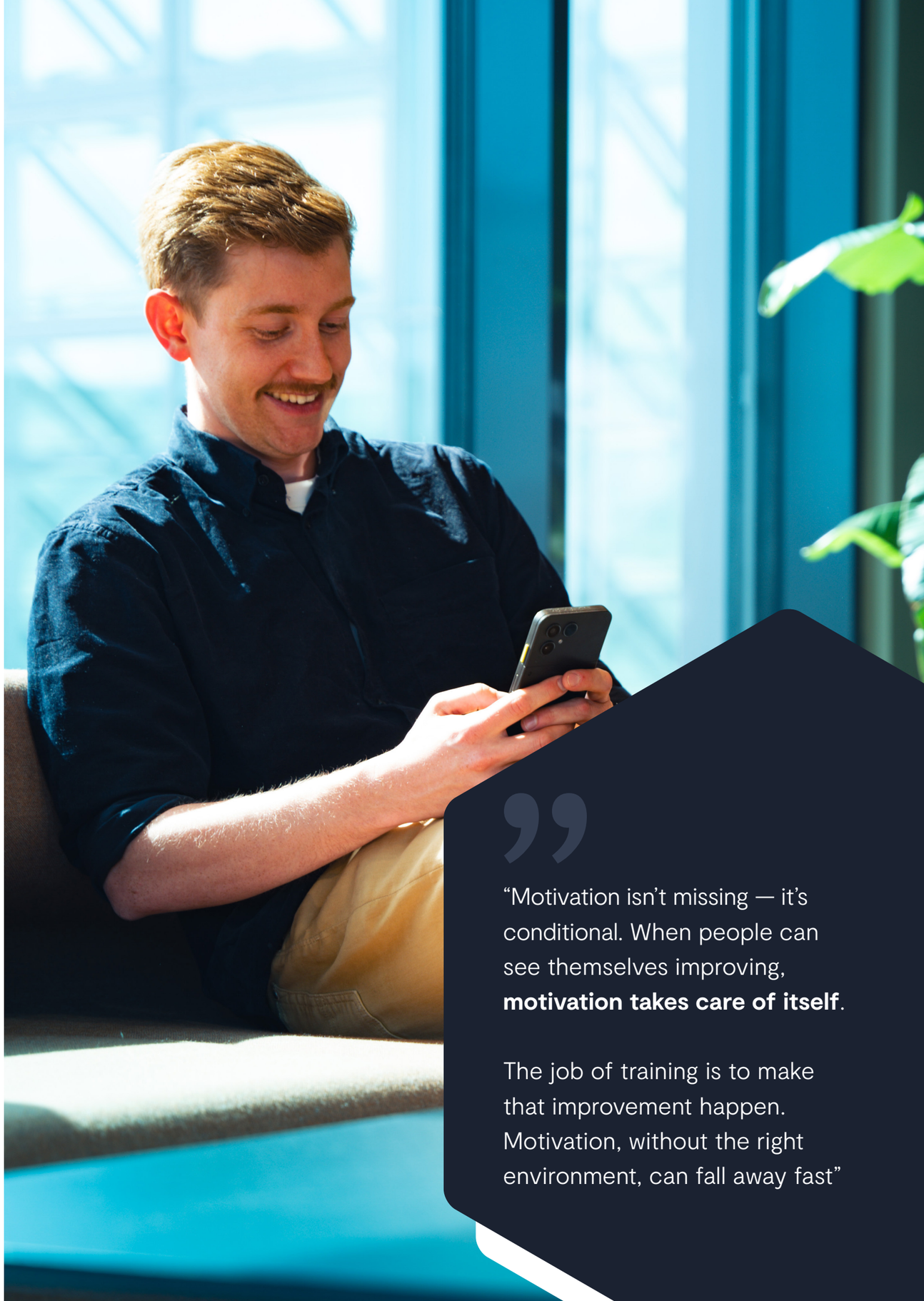
motivation follows.

## Methodology

All survey figures are drawn from Attensi's Motivation and Skill Mastery in the Workplace 2026 study; "(Qn)" markers refer to its question numbers. The study surveyed n=505 employed U.S. adults aged 18 and over working in the hospitality industry, fielded online in spring 2026 via an online panel, with quotas applied on age, gender and U.S. Census region for broad national representation. It comprised 67 questions across 21 topic areas, combining Likert-scale agreement batteries, forced-choice tradeoff questions and multi-select behavioural inventories.

Agreement figures combine "strongly agree" and "agree" responses; percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number; sub-group bases below n=50 should be read as directional rather than statistically generalizable. Q7 reflects the full sample, while Q8 figures are based on the n=209 sub-sample who selected "better training" in Q7.





"Motivation isn't missing — it's conditional. When people can see themselves improving, **motivation takes care of itself**.

The job of training is to make that improvement happen. Motivation, without the right environment, can fall away fast"

# **Likert Questions** (% Agreed)

| | TOTAL | Male | Female | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Getting better at something is motivational | 95% | 96% | 94% | 100% | 93% | 94% | 96% | 95% | 100% |
| The more I practice a task at work, the more confident and skilled I become | 94% | 93% | 96% | 94% | 91% | 95% | 98% | 95% | 95% |
| If I can clearly see my progress in training, it motivates me to get better | 93% | 91% | 95% | 90% | 91% | 94% | 96% | 99% | 75% |
| Feeling confident motivates me to keep practicing a new skill | 91% | 92% | 91% | 94% | 86% | 93% | 95% | 91% | 85% |
| I am more likely to learn something if the training is enjoyable | 90% | 90% | 89% | 90% | 88% | 90% | 87% | 95% | 90% |
| The more enjoyable the onboarding experience, the more confident I feel starting my job | 87% | 85% | 90% | 80% | 86% | 88% | 86% | 91% | 90% |
| I am motivated in my current job role | 86% | 87% | 84% | 84% | 87% | 86% | 86% | 83% | 95% |
| I am more motivated when training feels like a challenge I can succeed at with practice | 85% | 86% | 84% | 90% | 85% | 85% | 82% | 87% | 85% |
| I am more likely to finish training when it feels relevant to my actual job | 85% | 86% | 83% | 87% | 87% | 85% | 82% | 83% | 90% |
| Realtime feedback (e.g., “here’s what to try next”) helps build my confidence | 84% | 81% | 87% | 90% | 83% | 87% | 84% | 78% | 70% |
| Practicing skills in a safe environment helps me learn faster | 84% | 81% | 87% | 93% | 85% | 82% | 85% | 81% | 75% |
| I have access to the information I need to do my job well | 80% | 83% | 78% | 80% | 82% | 80% | 75% | 85% | 85% |
| Competing with myself or others motivates me to do better in training | 80% | 84% | 75% | 90% | 77% | 80% | 79% | 81% | 75% |
| I feel mastery in my current job role | 78% | 79% | 76% | 83% | 81% | 76% | 75% | 79% | 85% |
| Competing with myself or others would motivate me to improve at work | 78% | 80% | 76% | 83% | 80% | 76% | 78% | 75% | 75% |
| I would put more effort into learning if I could clearly see how it benefits me personally | 77% | 79% | 76% | 90% | 78% | 82% | 73% | 72% | 60% |
| I cannot master new skills without practicing them | 77% | 75% | 79% | 74% | 75% | 79% | 78% | 83% | 55% |
| I receive enough training in my job to master my role | 76% | 79% | 72% | 83% | 79% | 77% | 68% | 73% | 80% |
| I had to practice repeatedly before I felt good at my job | 74% | 76% | 73% | 86% | 78% | 74% | 73% | 69% | 70% |
| I feel more confident when I can try a task in a roleplay scenario before doing it with a real customer | 71% | 71% | 72% | 73% | 76% | 76% | 65% | 68% | 45% |
| Practicing in a simulation first would reduce the stress I feel during a busy shift.” | 71% | 69% | 73% | 77% | 71% | 76% | 66% | 66% | 65% |
| My onboarding prepared me well for real situations on the job | 70% | 68% | 70% | 84% | 73% | 72% | 62% | 66% | 65% |
| Rewards such as badges, streaks, or milestones make training more engaging for me | 69% | 68% | 71% | 73% | 75% | 74% | 58% | 70% | 45% |
| I feel more comfortable making mistakes in a digital game than in front of my peers. | 69% | 66% | 71% | 74% | 62% | 74% | 74% | 63% | 45% |
| I feel more motivated when technology gives me personalized feedback on how I can improve | 68% | 67% | 69% | 77% | 75% | 73% | 60% | 64% | 30% |
| I am more likely to practice when I know I’ll get instant feedback | 67% | 70% | 63% | 83% | 71% | 65% | 64% | 61% | 60% |
| More specific training would help me fully master my job role | 66% | 67% | 66% | 83% | 74% | 72% | 58% | 57% | 35% |
| I wish our training included more opportunities to practice real scenarios in simulated environments and game-mode | 66% | 65% | 67% | 73% | 70% | 69% | 65% | 54% | 45% |
| Most workplace training focuses on information rather than hands-on practice | 65% | 60% | 70% | 70% | 70% | 70% | 58% | 61% | 45% |
| Training that only provides information (videos, manuals, PDFs) does not fully prepare me to perform tasks on the job | 65% | 64% | 66% | 64% | 69% | 64% | 66% | 61% | 55% |
| I would practice skills more often if training felt like a game rather than a lesson | 65% | 60% | 69% | 80% | 72% | 64% | 67% | 52% | 35% |
| Simulation games that are realistic to my job role would motivate me to practice more than traditional learning methods | 64% | 62% | 67% | 84% | 72% | 68% | 58% | 53% | 40% |

| | TOTAL | Male | Female | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I would benefit from simulation games that are realistic to my job so I can practice before doing the role in real life | 63% | 63% | 64% | 77% | 73% | 66% | 59% | 48% | 45% |
| I am more likely to engage with training if I can complete it in short bursts (3-5 minutes) during quiet times at work. | 63% | 61% | 66% | 73% | 68% | 66% | 57% | 63% | 30% |
| When training feels boring or repetitive, I am less likely to remember it | 62% | 61% | 63% | 63% | 65% | 64% | 57% | 57% | 70% |
| Even when information is available, it doesn’t always translate into feeling confident or skilled at work. | 61% | 61% | 62% | 70% | 65% | 66% | 55% | 52% | 60% |
| I often feel I need more practice, not just more information, to feel confident at work. | 60% | 60% | 61% | 73% | 69% | 65% | 54% | 46% | 35% |
| I wish onboarding had included more interactive or gamified elements | 59% | 55% | 64% | 73% | 67% | 62% | 55% | 47% | 35% |
| AI-supported training would make me more likely to practice skills regularly | 59% | 58% | 61% | 63% | 71% | 64% | 48% | 54% | 25% |
| Having access to information alone does not mean I feel prepared to do tasks on the job. | 59% | 60% | 57% | 60% | 56% | 66% | 55% | 52% | 60% |
| I prefer training that feels like a game rather than a test | 59% | 58% | 60% | 76% | 60% | 60% | 55% | 57% | 35% |
| When training feels like a 'chore' added to my shift, I am less likely to focus on the quality of my learning. | 57% | 56% | 59% | 53% | 58% | 64% | 51% | 54% | 50% |
| I am better motivated when I have technology designed to help me, such as streaks, instant feedback, or AI generated coaching | 57% | 56% | 57% | 66% | 70% | 63% | 43% | 45% | 35% |
| AI powered training helps me understand what I’m doing right and wrong more quickly | 53% | 51% | 56% | 46% | 65% | 62% | 41% | 48% | 15% |
| I am more comfortable practicing roleplay scenarios in game-mode and realistic simulations than with a manager or peer | 52% | 50% | 55% | 63% | 54% | 58% | 45% | 47% | 40% |
| I find practicing roleplay scenarios with a manager or colleague more stressful than helpful | 52% | 46% | 59% | 63% | 55% | 56% | 49% | 45% | 35% |
| I only practice work skills consistently when I feel motivated to improve | 52% | 51% | 53% | 70% | 63% | 47% | 42% | 58% | 40% |
| If I don’t feel momentum of progress towards a goal, I am less likely to continue | 46% | 45% | 48% | 43% | 49% | 49% | 41% | 44% | 45% |
| I need more specific training to be motivated to succeed in my current role | 44% | 43% | 44% | 80% | 52% | 46% | 29% | 41% | 15% |
| When I’m not motivated, I tend to do the bare minimum needed to get through my shift | 40% | 37% | 44% | 54% | 45% | 45% | 34% | 30% | 20% |

# Training Cohort Likert Questions
(1-5 Scores)

| | Pay | Training | Delta |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q16 AI powered training helps me understand what I'm doing right and wrong more quickly | 3.32 | 3.74 | 0.42 |
| Q19 AI-supported training would make me more likely to practice skills regularly | 3.43 | 3.83 | 0.4 |
| Q19 I wish onboarding had included more interactive or gamified elements | 3.49 | 3.86 | 0.37 |
| Q1 I often feel I need more practice not just more information to feel confident at work. | 3.36 | 3.71 | 0.35 |
| Q5 I would benefit from simulation games that are realistic to my job so I can practice before doing the role in real life | 3.58 | 3.89 | 0.31 |
| Q19 Practicing in a simulation first would reduce the stress I feel during a busy shift." | 3.74 | 4.05 | 0.31 |
| Q9 I wish our training included more opportunities to practice real scenarios in simulated environments and game-mode | 3.71 | 4.02 | 0.31 |
| Q16 I am better motivated when I have technology designed to help me such as streaks instant feedback or AI generated coaching | 3.47 | 3.77 | 0.3 |
| Q9 I am more comfortable practicing roleplay scenarios in game-mode and realistic simulations than with a manager or peer | 3.36 | 3.65 | 0.29 |
| Q9 Simulation games that are realistic to my job role would motivate me to practice more than traditional learning methods | 3.61 | 3.9 | 0.29 |
| Q16 I would practice skills more often if training felt like a game rather than a lesson | 3.61 | 3.89 | 0.28 |
| Q1 Even when information is available it doesn't always translate into feeling confident or skilled at work. | 3.49 | 3.77 | 0.28 |
| Q1 I need more specific training to be motivated to succeed in my current role | 3.07 | 3.34 | 0.27 |
| Q16 I feel more motivated when technology gives me personalized feedback on how I can improve | 3.72 | 3.97 | 0.25 |
| Q5 Most workplace training focuses on information rather than hands-on practice | 3.63 | 3.87 | 0.24 |
| Q1 Having access to information alone does not mean I feel prepared to do tasks on the job | 3.52 | 3.74 | 0.22 |
| Q1 More specific training would help me fully master my job role | 3.74 | 3.96 | 0.22 |
| Q12 I prefer training that feels like a game rather than a test | 3.49 | 3.7 | 0.21 |
| Q19 The more enjoyable the onboarding experience the more confident I feel starting my job | 4.17 | 4.36 | 0.19 |
| Q1 I am motivated in my current job role | 4.18 | 4.37 | 0.19 |
| Q9 I feel more confident when I can try a task in a roleplay scenario before doing it with a real customer | 3.81 | 4 | 0.19 |
| Q12 I am more likely to engage with training if I can complete it in short bursts (3-5 minutes) during quiet times at work. | 3.66 | 3.83 | 0.17 |
| Q19 When training feels boring or repetitive I am less likely to remember it | 3.52 | 3.68 | 0.16 |
| Q16 Competing with myself or others would motivate me to improve at work | 4.01 | 4.15 | 0.14 |

| | Pay | Training | Delta |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q5 I had to practice repeatedly before I felt good at my job | 3.87 | 4.01 | 0.14 |
| Q12 Rewards such as badges streaks or milestones make training more engaging for me | 3.78 | 3.91 | 0.13 |
| Q12 I feel more comfortable making mistakes in a digital game than in front of my peers. | 3.74 | 3.87 | 0.13 |
| Q5 I am more motivated when training feels like a challenge I can succeed at with practice | 4.16 | 4.29 | 0.13 |
| Q1 Training that only provides information (videos manuals PDFs) does not fully prepare me to perform tasks on the job. | 3.66 | 3.77 | 0.11 |
| Q9 I cannot master new skills without practicing them | 3.93 | 4.03 | 0.1 |
| Q9 I only practice work skills consistently when I feel motivated to improve | 3.33 | 3.43 | 0.1 |
| Q12 When training feels like a 'chore' added to my shift I am less likely to focus on the quality of my learning. | 3.43 | 3.53 | 0.1 |
| Q9 Practicing skills in a safe environment helps me learn faster | 4.15 | 4.25 | 0.1 |
| Q12 Competing with myself or others motivates me to do better in training | 4.04 | 4.11 | 0.07 |
| Q12 I find practicing roleplay scenarios with a manager or colleague more stressful than helpful | 3.42 | 3.49 | 0.07 |
| Q5 Feeling confident motivates me to keep practicing a new skill | 4.37 | 4.44 | 0.07 |
| Q16 I am more likely to practice when I know I'll get instant feedback | 3.75 | 3.82 | 0.07 |
| Q16 Realtime feedback (e.g. "here's what to try next") helps build my confidence | 4.11 | 4.18 | 0.07 |
| Q19 My onboarding prepared me well for real situations on the job | 3.83 | 3.87 | 0.04 |
| Q5 The more I practice a task at work the more confident and skilled I become | 4.48 | 4.51 | 0.03 |
| Q1 Getting better at something is motivational | 4.51 | 4.53 | 0.02 |
| Q1 If I don't feel momentum of progress towards a goal I am less likely to continue | 3.19 | 3.21 | 0.02 |
| Q1 I receive enough training in my job to master my role | 3.97 | 3.98 | 0.01 |
| Q5 I am more likely to finish training when it feels relevant to my actual job. | 4.21 | 4.22 | 0.01 |
| Q1 I feel mastery in my current job role | 4.01 | 4.01 | 0 |
| Q5 I am more likely to learn something if the training is enjoyable | 4.37 | 4.37 | 0 |
| Q5 If I can clearly see my progress in training it motivates me to get better | 4.39 | 4.38 | -0.01 |
| Q12 I would put more effort into learning if I could clearly see how it benefits me personally | 4.02 | 3.99 | -0.03 |
| Q9 When I'm not motivated I tend to do the bare minimum needed to get through my shift | 3.01 | 2.98 | -0.03 |
| Q1 I have access to the information I need to do my job well (e.g. training materials guides instructions). | 4.15 | 4.05 | -0.1 |