

Online Certifications

Topline Report

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Prepared for:



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Executive Summary

There has been a significant shift in the perception of online education over the past decade, with nearly all leaders recognizing online degrees as more credible in the workplace now compared to ten years ago. Key factors contributing to this increased credibility include advancements in technology, improved quality standards by online education providers, and better alignment with modern professional requirements. Leaders highlight that compared to their peers with a traditional education, employees with online educational credentials excel in digital collaboration, adaptability/responsiveness, and familiarity with new tools and technology. Furthermore, such credentials are associated with various workplace improvements like increased productivity and qualified candidate pools, as reported by nearly all leaders. Moreover, the vast majority of leaders note that online learners generally stand out more than their traditionally educated peers, especially in terms of communication and collaboration in hybrid workplaces and continued professional development. Looking ahead, most leaders believe the tendency to consider candidates with online education will only grow, and even more anticipate an increase in tuition assistance programs at their company to further support skill development and professional growth.

Survey Methodology

The research was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the University of Phoenix among 502 U.S. adults aged 21 or older who are employed full-time, have a job level of manager/supervisor or higher, work in the human resources or learning and development function, employed at a company with at least 1,000 employees and operate in the manufacturing, financial services, information technology, or health care industry. The survey was conducted January 14 – 30, 2026.

Data are weighted where necessary by industry and number of employees to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within ± 4.8 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Summary of Findings

As workers with online credentials enter the workplace, they're proving the value of nontraditional learning.

Virtually all leaders (98%) see online degrees as more credible in the workplace now than 10 years ago, and the changes in the workplace are evident. As the result of employees having online education credentials, leaders have seen changes in their workplace that include increased productivity (63%), employees being able to pick up skills more quickly to respond to changes in the job market (62%), and more qualified candidates (60%). Majorities also cite improved morale among employees (55%) and more upward mobility for employees (52%).

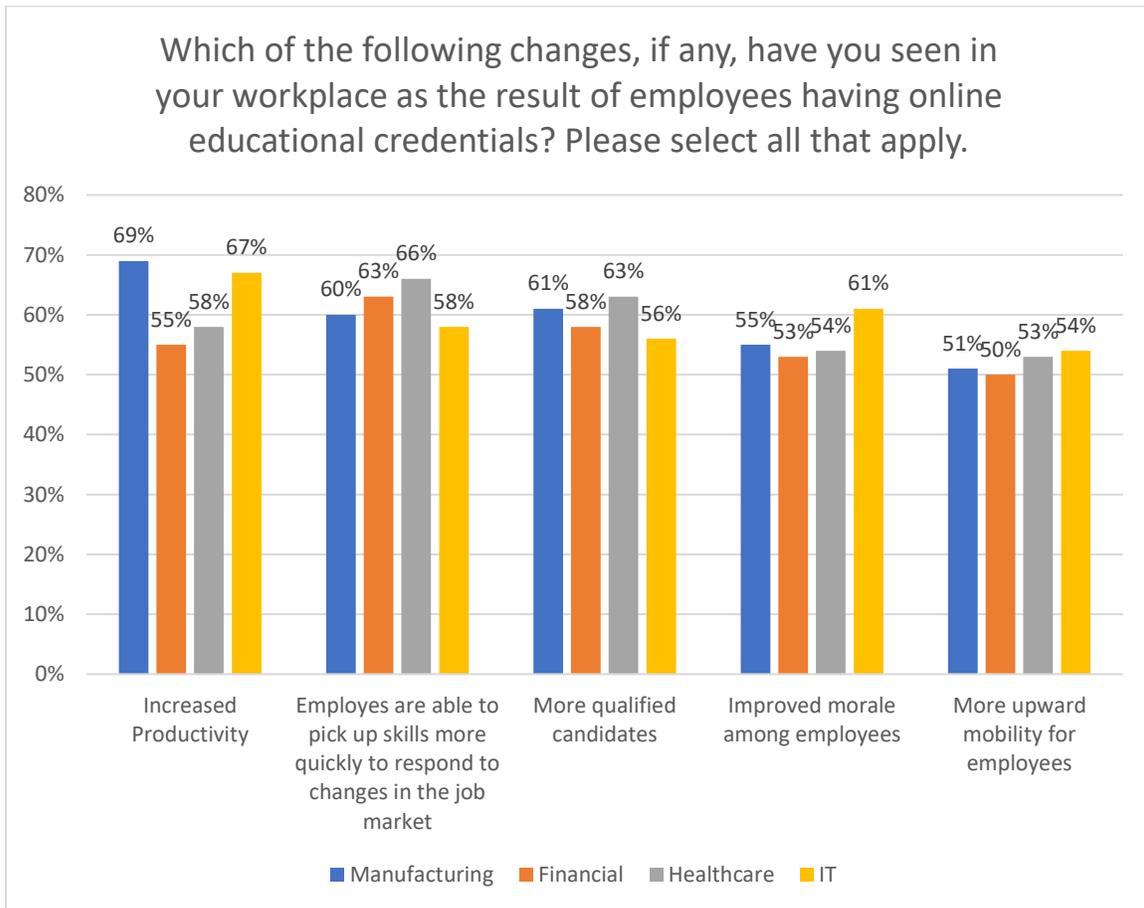


Figure 1: Majority of leaders in all industries have seen these changes, with those in manufacturing (69%) and IT (67%) reporting increased productivity; meanwhile, 66% of healthcare leaders and 63% of financial leaders see employees picking up skills more quickly.

The evolving business landscape has become more open to online learning in the wake of a shift to online and remote work. Leaders cite workers being more familiar/comfortable with the concept of learning online (60%) and employers being more comfortable with online and hybrid learning environments (60%) as reasons online degrees are seen as more credible now than a decade ago.

Workers with online credentials bring real skills to the workplace, and leaders are taking notice. Top reasons that employees with online education credentials stand out to leaders include possessing new and emerging skillsets (78%), recent or specialized skillsets (69%), and technical or hard skills (65%). These are followed by durable or soft skills (57%).

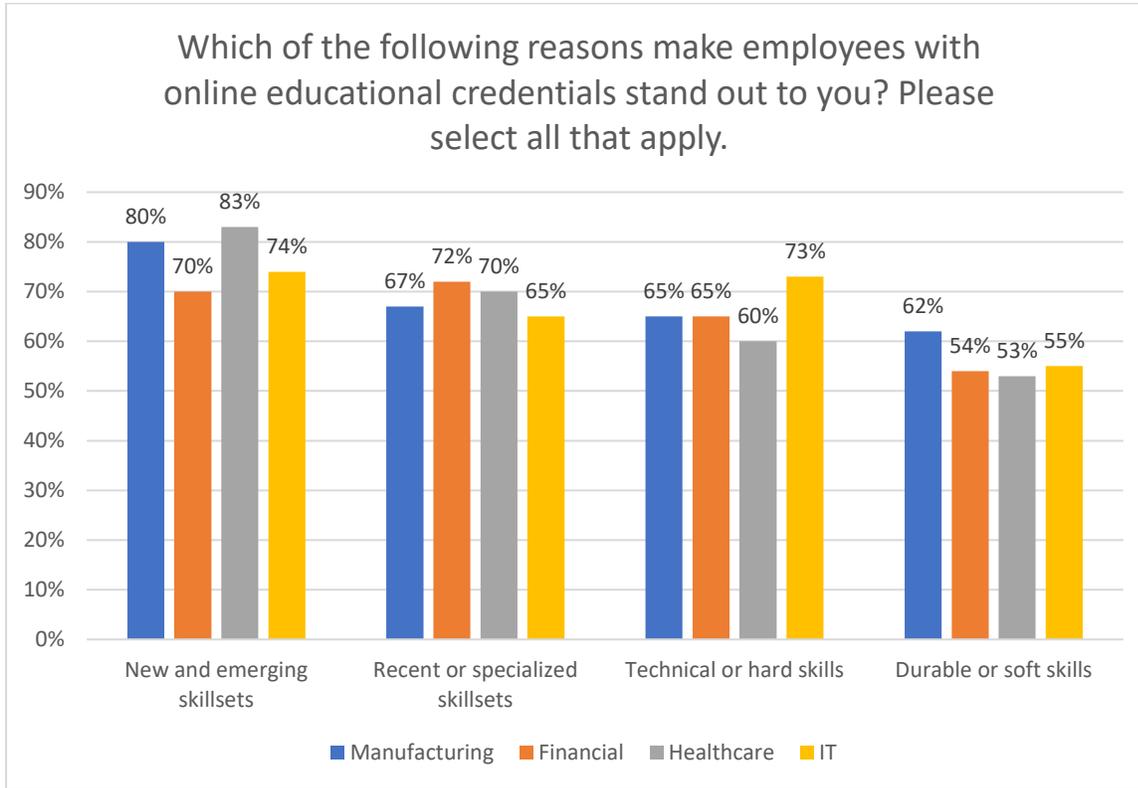


Figure 2: More than 4 in 5 leaders in healthcare (83%) note employees with online credentials stand out for their new and emerging skillsets, a sentiment shared by 80% of leaders in manufacturing and 74% of those in IT; nearly as many IT leaders (73%) note that these employees stand out for their technical or hard skills, while 72% of financial leaders point to these employees' recent or specialized skillsets.

Workers with online credentials are benefitting from an improved and evolving online education landscape.

Among the reasons for increased credibility are that the technology needed to provide credible online education has improved (68%), online education providers have improved quality standards (67%), and online programs align better with modern professional requirements (65%).

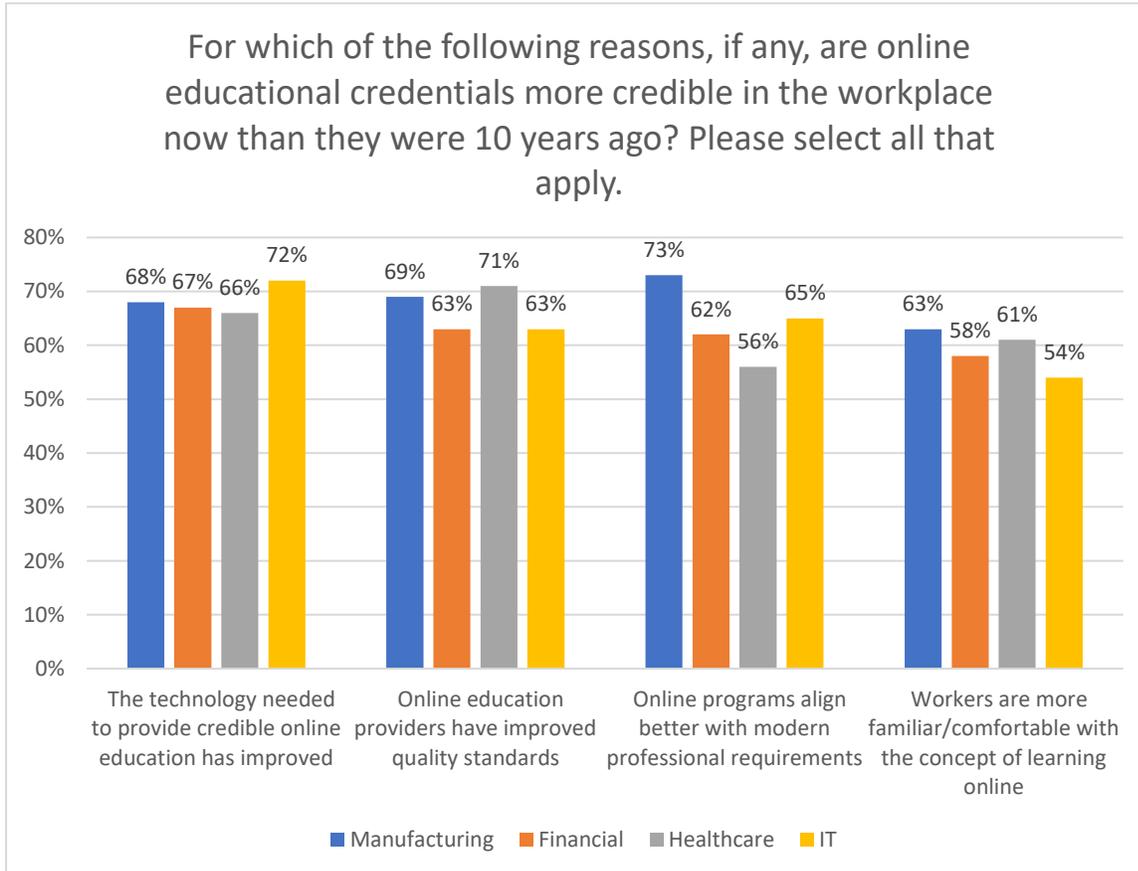


Figure 3: Nearly 3 in 4 leaders in manufacturing (73%) cite online programs' better alignment with modern professional requirements, while 72% of IT professionals note that the technology needed to provide credible online education has improved; 67% of financial leaders say the same. Healthcare leaders (71%) point to online education providers' improved quality standards, as do 69% of manufacturing leaders.

Workers with online education experience can demonstrate their digital skills. Top advantages leaders see in employees with online education over traditional education include stronger digital collaboration skills (68%), greater adaptability and responsiveness (66%), and familiarity with emerging tools and tech (64%). Nearly all leaders (97%) acknowledge that employees with online educational credentials have advantages over those with traditional education.

Leaders are also taking note when resumes with online education cross their desk. Top reasons job candidates with online credentials can stand out include flexibility to communicate and collaborate in hybrid workplaces (63%), willingness to continue professional development (60%), and more familiarity with online collaboration tools (59%). This is followed by flexibility and openness (58%), more up to date or relevant skillsets (57%), diversity of experience and skills (53%), and agility and responsiveness (49%).

Leaders want to take advantage of online education—but need help to do so.

Over the next 10 years, 85% of leaders believe their industries will be more likely to consider candidates with online education credentials, including nearly 2 in 5 leaders (39%) who foresee their industries being *much more likely* to consider these candidates. Another 11% say their industry is just as likely to consider candidates with online education credentials. Only 4% anticipate less consideration of these candidates. Key reasons businesses expect to offer more tuition assistance over the next five years include improving skillsets among employees (77%), attracting new employees (64%), improving business outcomes (63%), retaining current employees (59%), and improving the cost effectiveness of these benefits (59%).

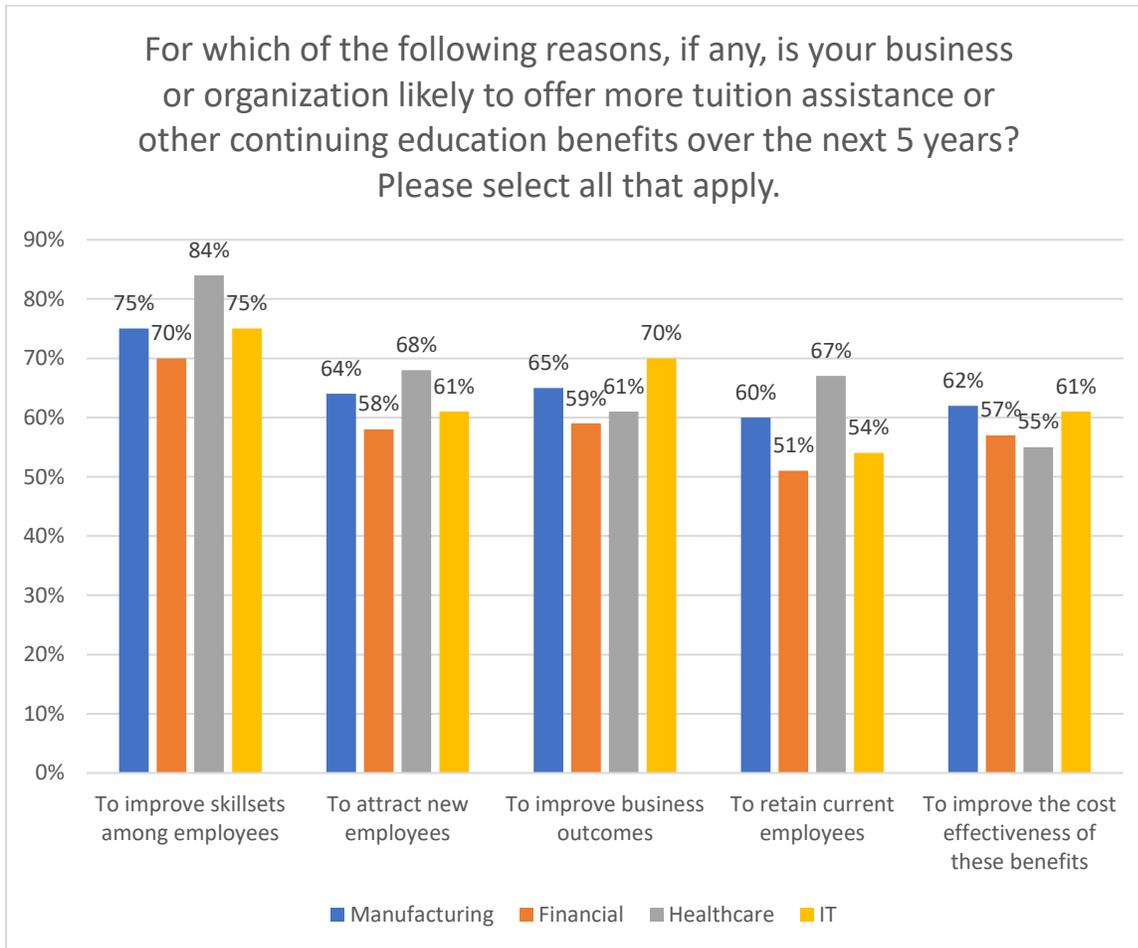


Figure 4: Improving skillsets among employees is the leading reason for offering more tuition assistance or other continuing education benefits over the next 5 years, cutting across all four industries. The majority of IT leaders cite improving business outcomes (70%), while healthcare leaders are attuned to attracting new employees (68%), as are 58% of financial leaders.

While leaders want to make the most of employees’ online education, many are seeing gaps in their ability to do so. Around half of leaders do not strongly agree that their organization is equipped to evaluate the skills of employees with online educational credentials (50%) or that they have the tools it needs to maximize the potential of employees with online educational credentials (53%).

Leaders with more confidence in their tools and abilities are seeing different changes in their workplace. Among leaders who strongly agree that they have the tools to maximize the potential of employees with

online education credentials, 66% have seen more qualified candidates as the result of employees having online education credentials—significantly more than the 55% of their peers who do not strongly agree. In addition, among those who strongly agree that they are equipped to evaluate the skills of employees with online education credentials, 61% have seen increased morale in the workplace as the result of employees having online education credentials, significantly more than the 49% of their peers who are less sure who say the same; there is a similar disparity in how many have seen increased competition for certain roles (50% vs. 40%).

Conclusion

As the workplace has continued to evolve, so have the online credentials that are becoming not only more accepted but preferred by leadership, given their alignment with contemporary workplace demands. This trend is likely to persist, with organizations increasingly recognizing and leveraging the unique skills and flexibility that online-educated candidates bring to the table. Consequently, an investment in online education and related support mechanisms like tuition assistance programs appears to be a strategic move for future-oriented organizations aiming to thrive in rapidly changing economic and technological environments.