



University of Phoenix
2026 Study

Career Optimism Special Report™ Series

Employer Brief: Turning Skills-First Intent into

Better Hiring Outcomes

Based on University of Phoenix Career Institute® Career Optimism Special Report™:
The Illusion of Progress in Skills-Based Hiring

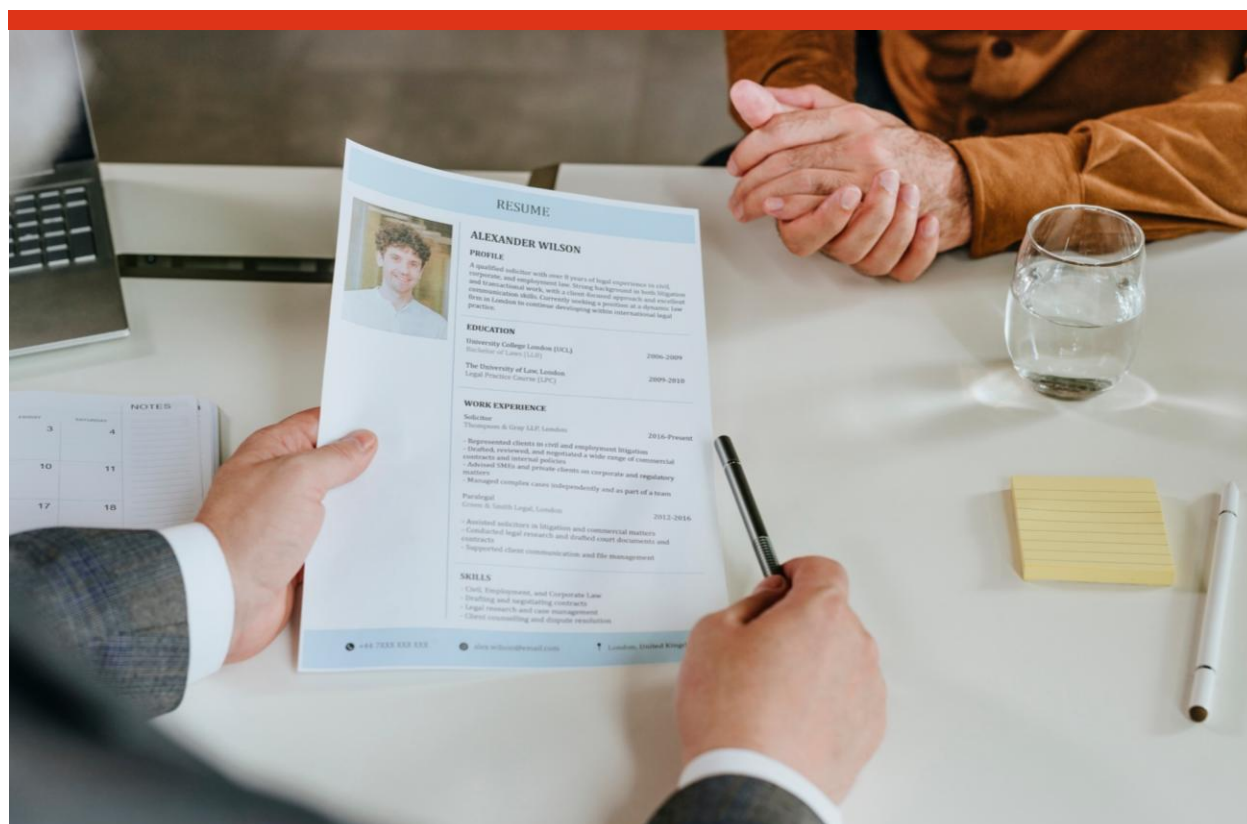


Why This Matters Now

Hiring teams are operating in a higher-volume, higher-noise environment, and many have embraced the idea of skills-first hiring as the way of the future. But most employers lack standardized hiring processes at the outset— and good intent without structure often creates more ambiguity. This makes meaningful shifts towards a more optimal hiring system difficult to achieve at scale.

In this overwhelming environment, employers face a high-stakes question: how do you effectively set a new course for hiring? In other words, how do you standardize and implement shared criteria for evaluating job-relevant skills without creating inconsistency, widening trust gaps, or screening out qualified talent in the process?

Without standardized practices for effective and consistent evaluation of job-relevant skills across your organization, skills-based hiring cannot be achieved at scale.





The Illusion of Progress: 3 Things Employers Need to Know

1 Skills-based hiring is gaining momentum—but implementation is unclear

Most hiring stakeholders* (82%) say they're moving toward skills-based hiring, but their systems haven't changed.

More than half (53%) of hiring stakeholders report that their organizations lack standardized hiring processes and 57% wish they had better training on how to evaluate candidates' skills—underscoring the lack of clarity in the shift towards skills-based models.

What this means: When structure is missing, “qualified” can become a moving target—varying by team, role, and reviewer.



82%

of employers say they're moving toward skills-based hiring.

2 Inconsistency is built into the process and teams aren't well equipped

Even as 92% of employers say they personally know how to evaluate skills, many admit that their internal processes don't support that goal.

Criteria vary across roles and reviewers, and evaluator readiness is uneven and lacking: 24% of hiring stakeholders report receiving no training before interviewing candidates.



1 in 4

hiring stakeholders (24%) receive no training before interviewing candidates.

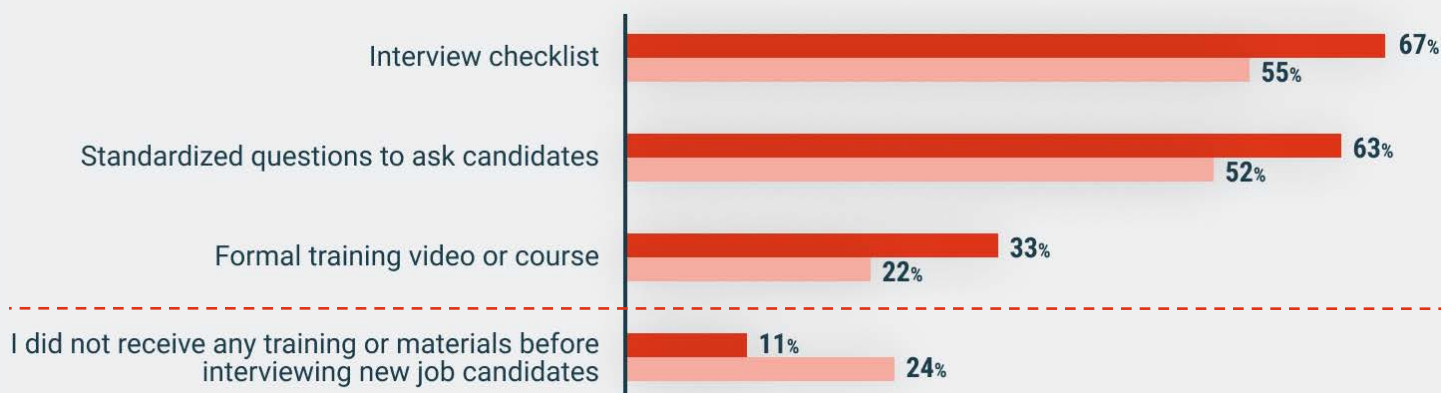
**Hiring stakeholders are full-time employees with influence (participated in an interview, gave feedback on a candidate during the process, etc.) over hiring decisions at their company at the time of the research*



Training / Materials Received Before Interviewing Job Candidates

[Shown: % Top 3 Selected]

- HR Team hiring stakeholders
- Non-HR Team hiring stakeholders



What this means: Without consistent standards and calibrated interviewers, skills-first hiring becomes harder to execute—decisions default to interpretation, not evidence.

3 When signal is weak, shortcuts fill the gap

When job-relevant signals are hard to find, employers default to what feels fastest and most reliable. Referrals become a common shortcut, with hiring teams treating personal networks as a proxy for candidate quality—often at the expense of consistency and expertise.



79%

of hiring stakeholders say referrals influence final decisions.



What this means: Without a stronger skills signal, organizations default to what feels efficient—networks, proxies, and opaque filters—undermining the effectiveness of skills-based hiring.

Until employers strengthen the way skills are defined, evaluated, and governed, skills-first efforts won't produce even, defensible, and objective outcomes.



only

37%

of hiring stakeholders say their organizations audit their AI tools for fairness.

Want to dig into more findings on the state of skills-based hiring? Check out the full whitepaper report: phoenix.edu/career-institute/illusion-of-progress-in-skills-based-hiring

Learn more about University of Phoenix's Workforce Solutions Group: phoenix.edu/workforce-solutions

Methodology

A 20-minute online survey of n=2,000 U.S. adults: n=1,000 job seekers and n=1,000 hiring stakeholders.

Fielded June 2–13, 2025.

Supplemented by 10 qualitative 1:1 video interviews with hiring stakeholders.

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