

Training Strategies **to Address the Soft Skills Gap**



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Introduction:

Mind the Gap



In a world increasingly populated with technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), it's not only technical skills that enable organizations to thrive and grow. Indeed, soft skills like emotional intelligence and communication are increasingly important as routine jobs are automated and collaboration, creativity, and innovation become more critical. In the face of digital transformation, soft skills can be a source of competitive advantage and differentiation both in the talent market and within a company's industry.

Unfortunately, these skills are at a premium. They're hard to find in new hires and in short supply among the current workforce as well. Although it's true that companies in any industry will find themselves with skill gaps from time to time, the soft skills gap exists in most departments, in most companies, in most industries. If left unchecked, these gaps can derail an organization's ability to execute its strategic plan and accomplish its business goals.

Companies are aware of this need; in previous Training Industry research, learning and development (L&D) professionals across company size and current training capabilities identified priorities including developing employees' communication and relationship-building skills¹. Further, recent Training Industry market research on sourcing practices found that companies are as likely to turn to external providers for soft skills training as they are for leadership training or IT training². These efforts highlight the recognized importance of soft skills in today's workplace.

How can organizations bridge the skills gap? They can try to hire employees to fill their gaps, but this approach can be inefficient and, ultimately, still leave the organization with some holes. Training is the most effective and cost-efficient way to bridge skill gaps and create an organization that's ready for the future. That's the role of L&D, after all: to close gaps in knowledge, skills, and abilities across the enterprise.

¹ Training Industry, Inc. data, N=305

² Training Industry, Inc. data, N=453

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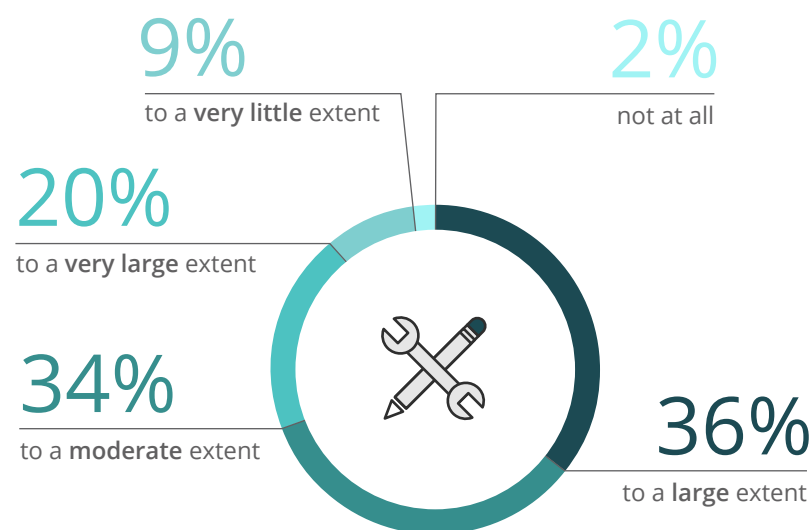
To learn where skill gaps exist and how training can best address them, BizLibrary partnered with Training Industry, Inc. to survey 411 learning professionals working in companies across a variety of industries. These leaders largely agreed (Figure 1) that their training organizations have the capability to close skill gaps and shared insights on how to do so. This ebook distills their responses into strategies your organization can use to boost soft skills across your workforce.

The leadership team for **ABC Software**, a large technology company, believes its workforce needs upskilling in soft skills. Based on customer complaints, low sales numbers and feedback on people management across the company, the team has asked the training organization to implement a new soft skills training program across the board.



BRENDA, a training manager, is tasked with the management of this project. This ebook will use Brenda and her company as an example of how to assess and close skill gaps across an organization.

FIGURE 1: Training Organizations' Ability to Close Skill Gaps





Chapter 1:

Where Are the Skill Gaps?



FIGURE 2: Skill Gaps Across Functional Areas

DEPARTMENTS & JOB FUNCTIONS	VERY LITTLE OR NO SKILLS GAP	VERY LARGE OR LARGE SKILLS GAP
		
Accounting/Finance	28%	36%
Administration/Governance	31%	33%
Compliance/Regulatory	40%	30%
Customer Service	43%	31%
Distribution/Supply Chain	33%	27%
Engineering	30%	28%
Human Resources/L&D	36%	31%
IT	33%	32%
Manufacturing/Production	29%	27%
Marketing	36%	29%
Operations	42%	29%
Product Management	34%	32%
Purchasing/Procurement	37%	31%
Research & Development	34%	29%
Sales	34%	30%

Brenda's company believes its soft skills gap exists across teams and levels, and it's probably right. Our research found that there is no sole department or job function where the soft skills gap exists — it is a challenge organizations face across their workforce and regardless of their industry (Figure 2). While it's clear from the data that gaps may not be present in every department within an organization, it is often the case that skill gaps exist in multiple functions; just 21% of respondents said they currently have gaps in only one or two departments.

Within these functions, there are some differences in which skills are lacking. The skills areas where organizations commonly see gaps within leadership teams are communication, people management, social intelligence, and change management. On the other hand, the least common skill gaps for leaders included resource management, desktop computing, and technical skills. In other words, the skills that leaders most need, especially in the age of automation, are also the ones in shortest supply.

There is no sole department or job function where the soft skills gap exists — it is a challenge organizations face across their workforce and regardless of their industry.

At ABC Software, for instance, in 360-degree feedback assessments, managers' direct reports frequently complain that their supervisors do not give them actionable feedback they can use to improve their performance — a key people management skill. In addition, when the company began automating some of its sales process, it found that many sales managers did not adequately prepare their reps for the change, resulting in confusion and lack of adoption.

TABLE 1: Skill Gaps in Leadership Roles

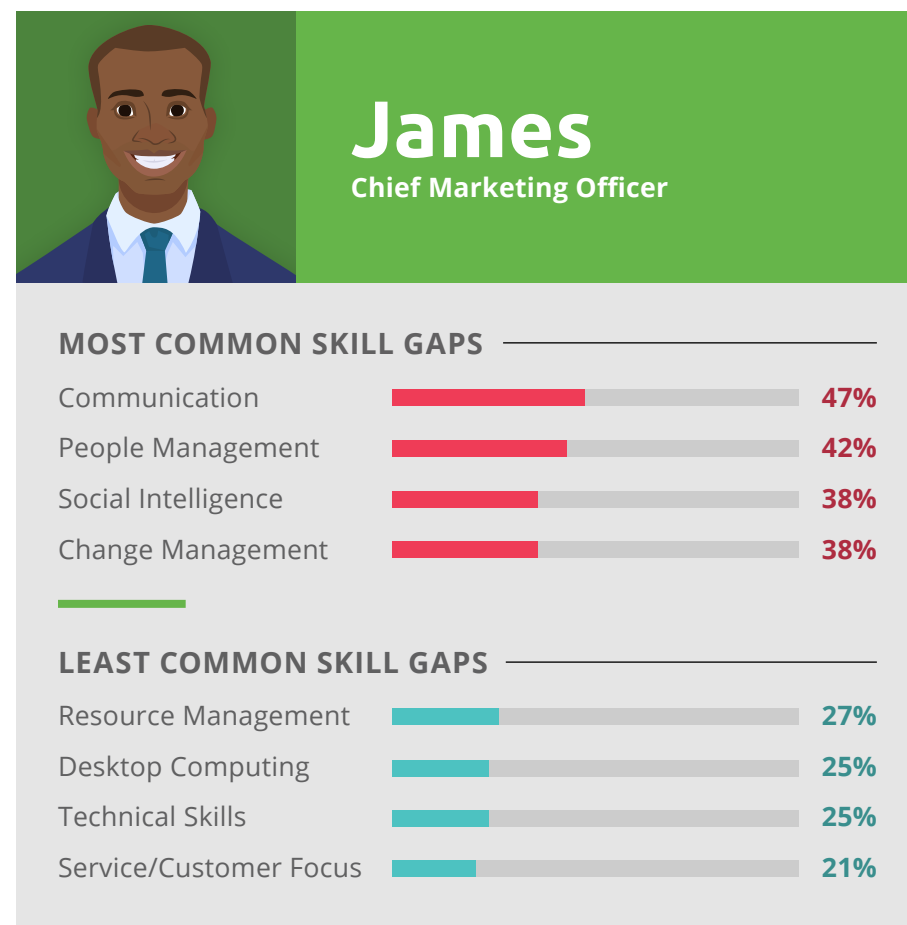
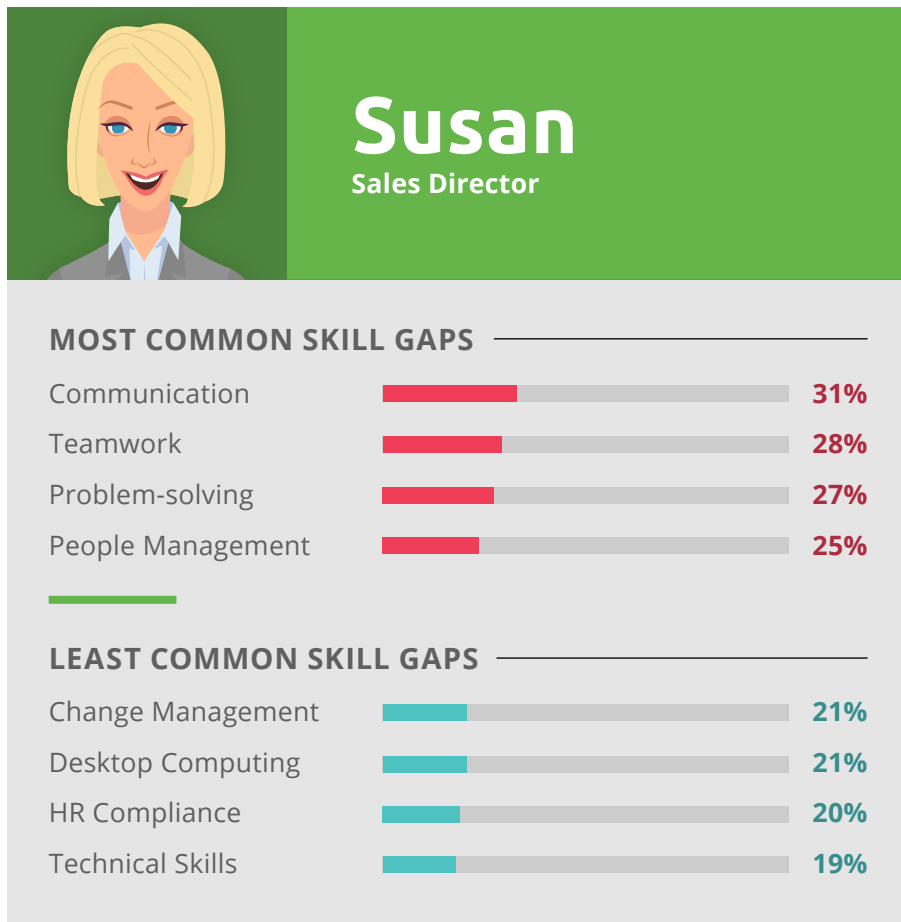


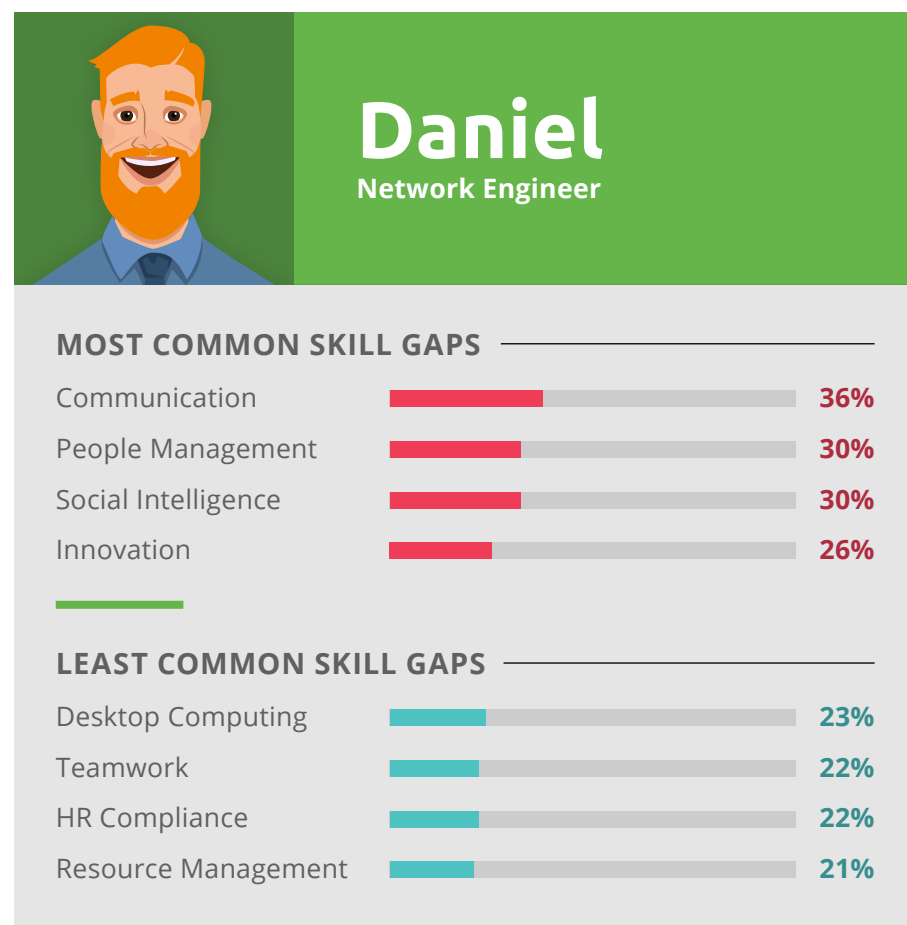
TABLE 2: Skill Gaps in Sales and Service Roles



ABC Software's sales numbers are lagging. Many teams are failing to retain customers when their initial software subscription expires, and surveys indicate low satisfaction with the support ABC offers its customers. These problems make sense in light of our research, which found that for individuals in sales or service roles, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and people management — which are critical to effective sales and customer service — are most lacking.

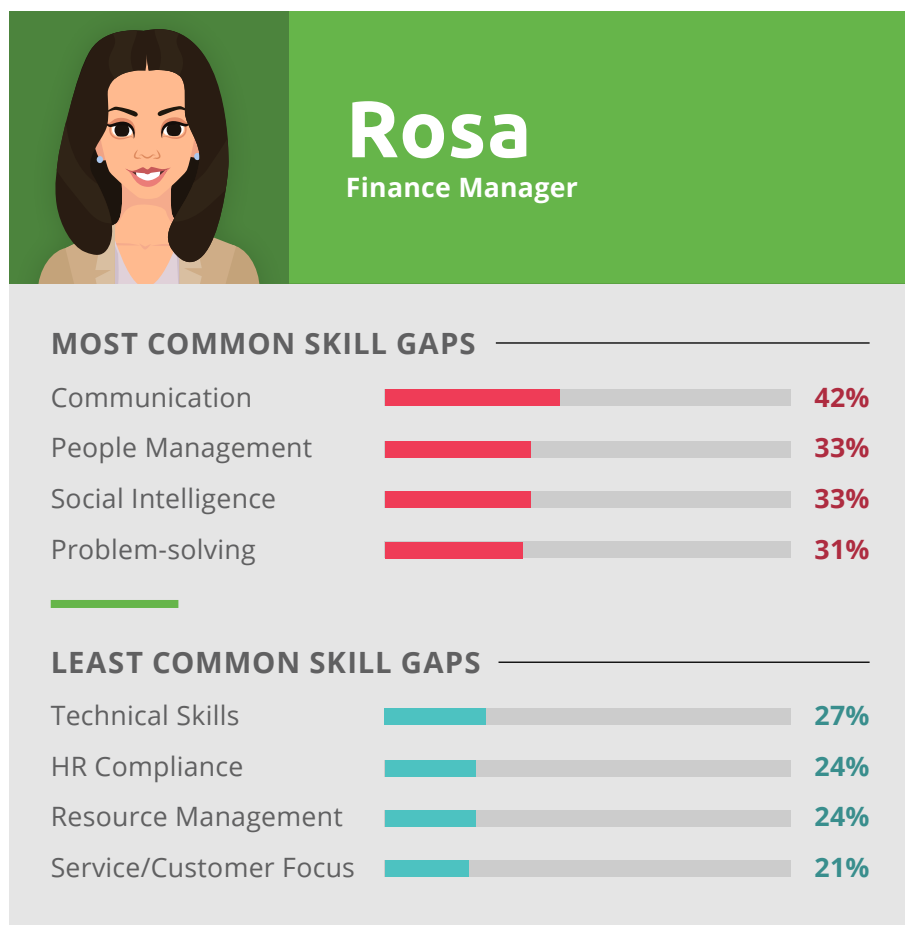
While ABC Software recruits the top talent from the world's leading computer science and engineering universities, it has found that many of those employees leave the company soon after arriving or struggle to work in the collaborative atmosphere ABC has worked to cultivate in its product development departments. Senior leaders believe that this problem stems from poor communication skills and social intelligence — and again, based on our research, they may be right. These soft skills were among the most common gaps reported for technical roles.

TABLE 3: Skill Gaps in Technical Roles



**Communication, people management,
and social intelligence are important
for technical employees.**

TABLE 4: Skill Gaps in Non-Technical Roles



It may seem that technical skills are the most critical for technical roles, but the popularity of collaborative team structures is growing, as is the necessity of understanding the user experience. Therefore, communication, people management, and social intelligence are important for technical employees. In addition, it's concerning that innovation is a skills gap among the technical employees creating products and services to meet the emerging needs of their customers, which their employers rely on for revenue and long-term business growth.

Chapter 2: **What Training Are Organizations Offering?**



As a large, global company, ABC Software offers a variety of training programs already. Similar to the companies represented in our survey, these programs are focused on topics including employee engagement and motivation, ethics, job-specific technical skills, goal-setting, and decision-making (Table 5).

TABLE 5: The Most Common Training Topics Offered, by Role

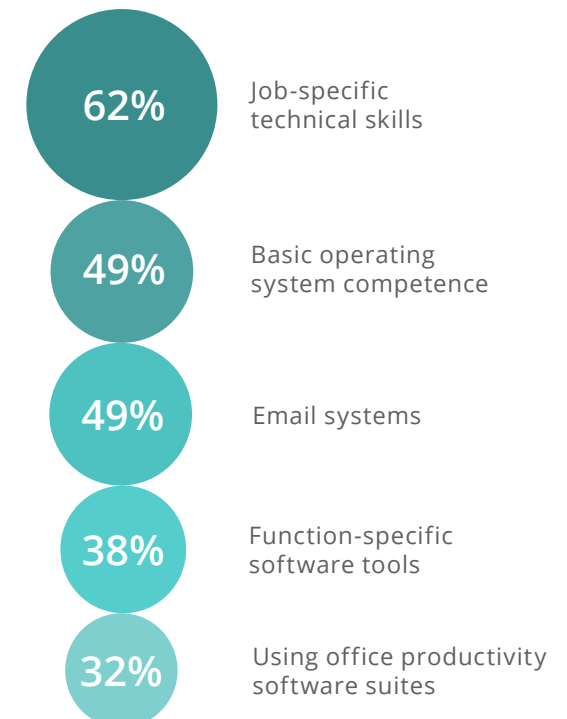
MANAGERIAL



TECHNICAL



NON-TECHNICAL



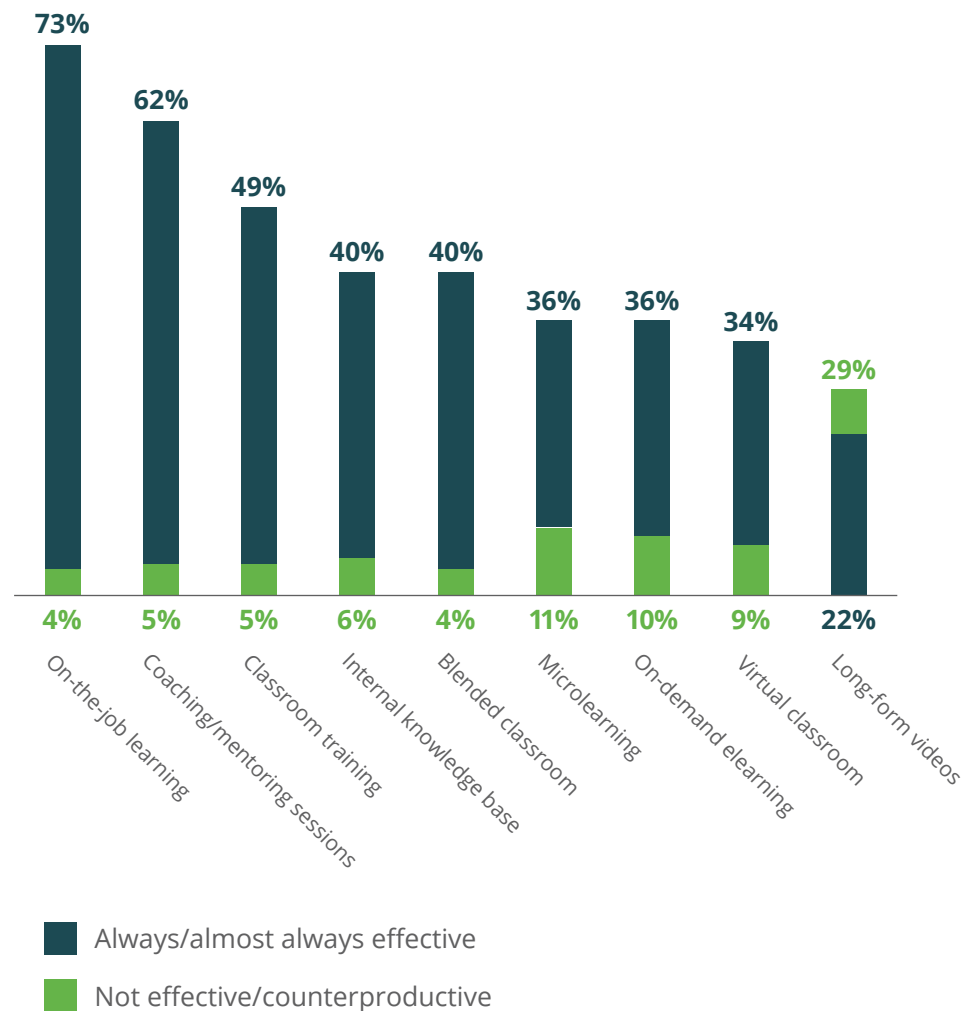


Notably, there is some crossover where ABC's training appears to be at least attempting to close critical skill gaps. For example, training on conducting difficult conversations could help leaders improve their communication skills and social intelligence; training on employee engagement and motivation, and interviewing and hiring could help them improve their people management skills; and training on goal-setting and resource management could help them improve their change management skills.

Still, the fact that ABC Software is providing this training and still seeing soft skill gaps across roles suggests that the training is lacking, either in the depth of learning content or the methods of training delivery — which is why its leaders have asked Brenda and her training team to launch a new soft skills training program. The company is currently relying largely on classroom training, one of the highest-rated modalities, to provide its current programs. Our research found that on-the-job training, coaching, and classroom-based training are largely considered highly effective methods of delivering training, while learning leaders rate long-form videos as the least effective — or even counterproductive — modalities. (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Training Delivery Method Effectiveness

On-the-job training, coaching, and classroom-based training are considered highly effective methods.





Based on findings from this and other Training Industry research, we can make three interrelated recommendations to Brenda as she and her team attempt to close the soft skills gap in the ABC Software workforce:

- 1 Conduct a needs assessment.
- 2 Implement blended learning.
- 3 Address gaps across the enterprise rather than on a role-by-role or department-by-department basis.

We will discuss how Brenda implements these recommendations in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3:

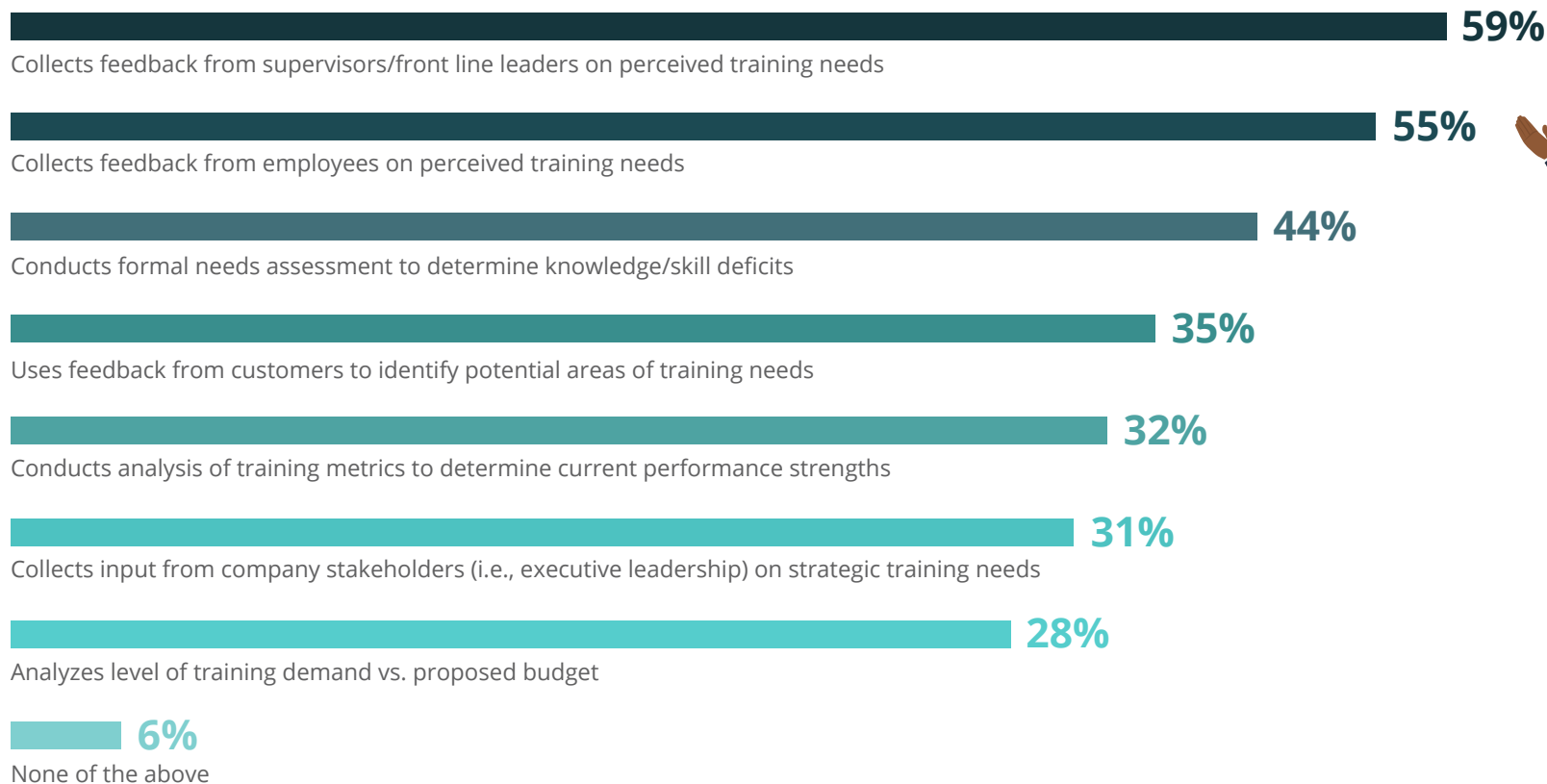
Closing the Soft Skills Gap



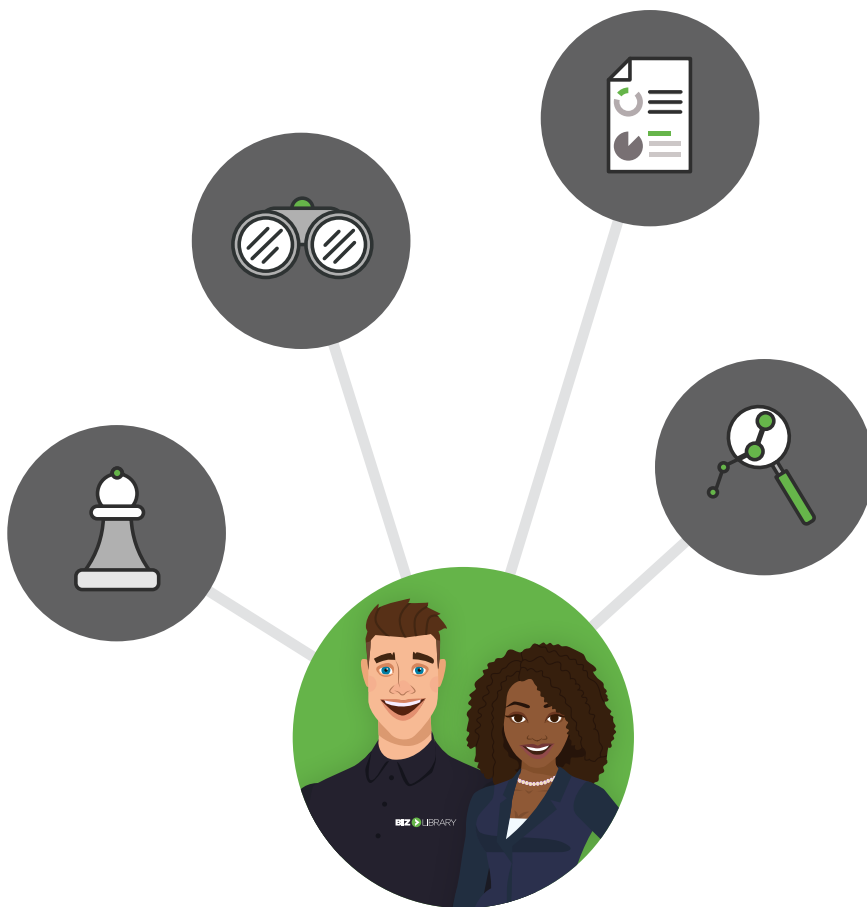
Before you can begin to address gaps in soft skills, you must know whether these gaps exist at your company and how large they might be. With that in mind, Brenda begins by conducting a formal needs assessment, which a recent Training Industry survey of 396 L&D professionals found was one of the most common ways to determine where knowledge and skill gaps exist (Figure 4).

Other common means of identifying training needs include collecting feedback from supervisors, front line leaders, employees, and customers. While this feedback is important, it can also be anecdotal, which is why a formal process of gathering data on employees' skills is also critical to developing an effective training program.

FIGURE 4: Methods of Identifying Training Needs



A formal process of gathering data on employees' skills is critical to developing an effective training program.



Brenda decides to work with ABC's training partner, BizLibrary, to assess skill gaps and create training benchmarks and goals to help fill them. Together, they conduct a thorough needs assessment, including:

- Interviewing stakeholders, including learners, their managers, and customers.
- Observing employees at work.
- Evaluating learners' skills and knowledge through formal assessments.
- Collecting and analyzing business metrics, such as sales numbers, revenue growth, employee productivity, and employee engagement.

Based on the needs assessment, Brenda identifies the soft skills that are lacking across the organization and establishes goals for a new soft skills training program. She knows there is a range of modalities she might use for the program, so she carefully considers which methods best fit her learners and her training goals.

Ultimately, Brenda decides on a blended approach. After all, learning is not “one-size-fits-all,” and neither is a modern approach to delivering training content. The most robust and effective L&D initiatives incorporate multiple delivery modalities to create a blended learning experience.

Which types of methods blend together best? The answer can vary based on the type of content, the size of the learner pool, and the available resources. Our research found that on-the-

job learning, coaching and mentoring, and classroom-based training are all considered effective methods of delivering training (Figure 5).

On-the-job learning, coaching and mentoring, and classroom-based training are all considered effective methods of delivering training.

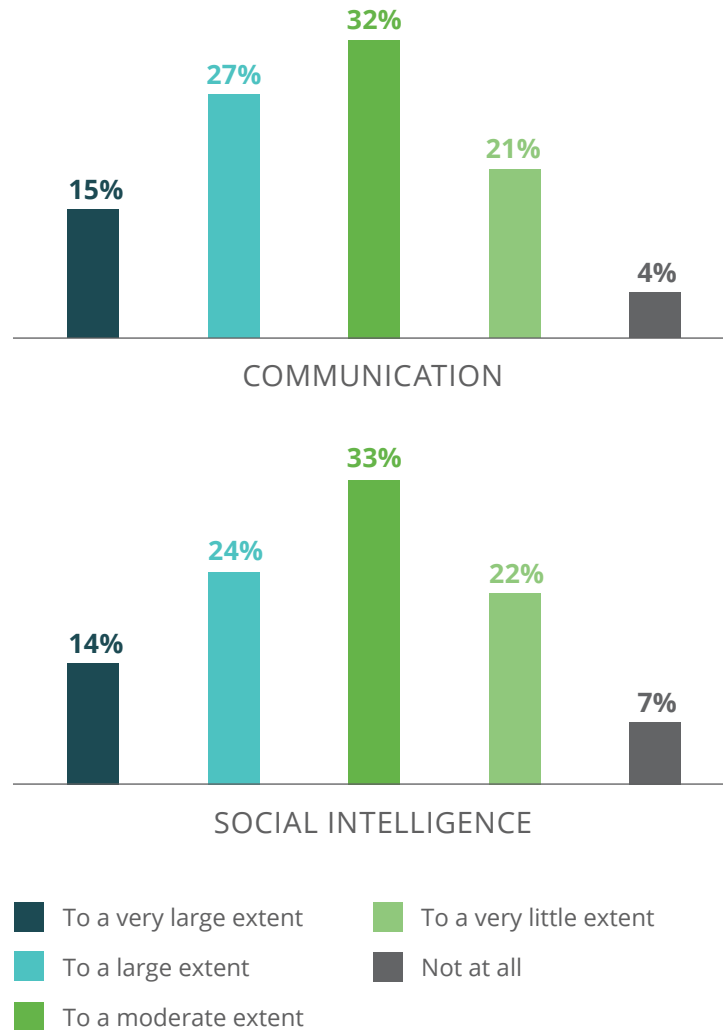
FIGURE 5: Effectiveness of Training Delivery Methods



The most robust and effective L&D initiatives incorporate multiple delivery modalities to create a blended learning experience.

FIGURE 6: Soft Skill Gaps in the General Employee Population

Gaps in communication skills and social intelligence exist across industries, functions, and roles.



Because soft skills are complex, involving nuanced scenarios and interactions with other people, Brenda decides on a blended learning approach, which combines online and in-person methods. For example, since her needs assessment identified a skill gap among new managers in their ability to give good feedback to their team members, she decides to develop an [elearning module](#) aimed at first-time managers that introduces the principles of giving feedback. After they complete the elearning, the new managers will explore the concepts in greater depth in a half-day classroom session, followed by coaching to practice their new skills and receive feedback from an experienced coach.

This is a specific example, but since Brenda's needs assessment, like our research, found soft skill gaps across levels, functions, and departments (Figure 6), she takes an enterprise approach, rather than addressing the gap person by person or even department by department. This tactic will maximize her L&D resources while meeting the needs of the widest possible audience.

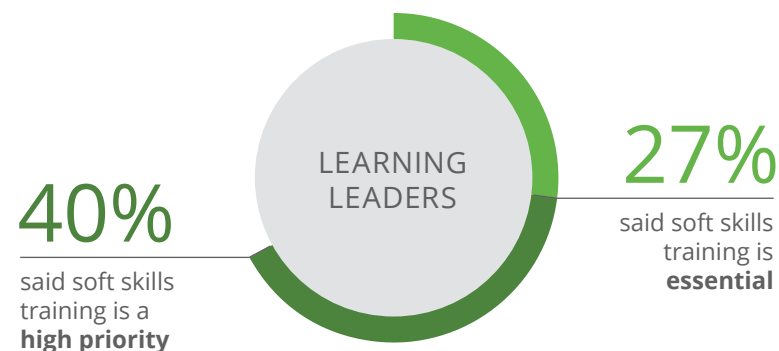


Taking an enterprise approach will maximize your L&D resources while meeting the needs of the widest possible audience.

Conclusion



Soft skills are increasingly an area of focus for learning and development. In previous research on training organizations' priorities, 27% of learning leaders said soft skills training is "essential," and another 40% said it is a "high priority." Furthermore, as a topic, soft skills commands levels of investment comparable to sales training or new hire orientation³. However, our current research shows that most companies are not adequately meeting their organization's training needs for these topics, which include communication, people management, conflict management, and managing diversity. As automation eliminates or shrinks jobs focused on routine tasks and gives rise to more jobs focused on interpersonal relationships, creativity, and innovation, it is now a business imperative for organizations to upskill their workforce in these soft skills.



- ✓ COMMUNICATION
- ✓ PEOPLE MANAGEMENT
- ✓ CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
- ✓ MANAGING DIVERSITY

³ Training Industry, Inc. data, N=558

The soft skills gap exists across industries, organizations, levels, and job functions, including leadership, sales and service, non-technical, and technical roles. Fortunately, most learning leaders believe that training is an effective way to close those gaps. It just needs to be carefully designed and delivered.

BizLibrary can help organizations with all three of these recommendations. [Visit our website](#) to learn how our platform, content library, and accompanying client services can help you close the soft skills gap in your workforce.

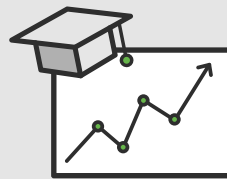
Let's recap our three recommendations for soft skills training:

1



Conduct a needs assessment to identify where there are gaps and understand how you can leverage training to close them.

2



Provide blended learning programs that include modalities such as on-the-job training, coaching and mentoring, and classroom training, among others, to engage a variety of learners and provide effective instruction, practice, and reinforcement opportunities.

3



Finally, by deploying training across the enterprise rather than team by team or learner by learner, organizations can maximize their resources and reach the widest group of employees.

Training is an effective way to close the soft skills gaps. It just needs to be carefully designed and delivered.



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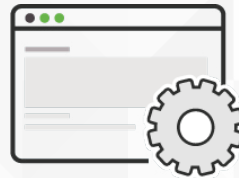
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