

Upskill Fast, Scale Faster: A Buyer's Guide to Learning Solutions

How to choose the right learning, growth, and HR solutions that address the needs of your growing organization and lean, agile teams.



Introduction

Why choosing the right solutions can balance people strategy with organization objectives.

Small and mid-sized organizations face unique pressures in driving workforce development and staying agile. For these organizations, navigating growth is as exhilarating as it is challenging. They have to build a skilled workforce, manage risk, and scale operations — all while balancing limited L&D and HR resources.

As these organizations evolve, they need a technology partner that grows with them. Their partners have to offer integrated, scalable solutions that drive efficiency, retain talent, and ensure HR and learning practices support current skills needs and long-term goals.

This buyer's guide highlights the core challenges HR and operational leaders at small and mid-sized organizations often encounter. You'll find multiple insights and strategic recommendations for evaluating how technology solutions address your needs effectively. By identifying these challenges and linking them to priority attributes, you can select the solution that best aligns with your organization's growth strategy and helps you build a future-ready workforce.

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1

Determine organizational priorities and identify core solution attributes

Whether you're in rapid expansion, sustainable scaling, transformation, or focusing on resilience-building, you have to align your workforce development with your organization's growth drivers. This guide will help you choose a solution that enables your teams to:

- Deploy training and upskilling
 - Provide personalized, pre-curated learning experiences with multi-language training at scale and activation of subject matter experts.
- Streamline talent management
 - Use AI-driven insights to make data-informed, capability-based hiring and performance decisions, quickly connecting with best-fit candidates internally and externally.
- Empower career advancement
 - Provide personalized, skill-based pathways to meet employee aspirations, close skills gaps, and support employee engagement through development conversations.
- Create a unified HR ecosystem
 - Centralize HR processes with configurable reporting, automated workflows, and integration with HRIS and other tools.

Attributes to consider



Usability

(automation, accessible, devices)



Integrations, extensibility, and scalability

(unified, open, flexible)



Reporting and analytics

(data, insights)



AI-enabled and generative AI

(automation, efficiency)



Services and support

(implementation, adoption, ROI)

This guide is structured to help you evaluate these five essential solution pillars, making it easier to choose a platform that will support your organization's workforce in reaching its future-ready goals.



Usability

Selecting an easy-to-navigate solution helps drive adoption, improve engagement, and ensure efficiency and productivity. Usability does not just mean a visually appealing interface with an intuitive design and fast load times. It also means automation to drive efficiency and simplify complex workflows, an accessible and compliant system, and a mobile-friendly design with mobile access.

For example, a user-friendly system includes help guides, tooltips, and built-in tutorials that make onboarding new users easy. A study by McKinsey found that organizations can save up to 30% in training costs by adopting user-friendly systems ¹

- ✓ Clean, intuitive interface
- ✓ Automated, smart recommendations
- ✓ Mobile accessibility
- ✓ Self-service support for quick onboarding

¹ [“Automation at scale: The benefits for payers.”](#) McKinsey & Company, July 2019



Integrations, extensibility, and scalability

A unified talent development solution is open, flexible, and connects to your HRIS and LMS. These attributes ensure there is a single source of truth for employee data, which enables you and your organization to quickly access the data and insights you need to make strategic talent decisions.

Having the option to buy a turnkey L&D solution or a base product with add-ons is a viable buying approach that can scale with your organization’s growth. Being able to go live quickly with minimal IT intervention and the ability to invest in other use cases as your business scales ensures that your organization can adapt and grow seamlessly, maximizing ROI while minimizing disruptions to your operations.

When a vendor offers the right balance of extensibility with use case packaging and your HR systems are connected and sharing data, you can experience a more seamless employee experience. This new experience drives consistency across your workforce by providing your organization with the data necessary to be agile and responsive. According to PwC’s What’s Important to CIOs in 2024, 47% of CIOs are prioritizing the transformation of their data platforms to drive organizational growth.²

- ✓ Packaging options: Either all-in-one turnkey or base-plus add-on solutions
- ✓ Connectivity with HR systems (e.g., payroll, recruiting, performance)
- ✓ Real-time data access for informed decisions
- ✓ Single sign-on and shared report
- ✓ Flexible API options for custom integrations with tools you already use

² [“What’s important to CIOs in 2024.”](#) PwC



Reporting and analytics

Your talent development solution should provide you with dashboards and reporting across all functional areas, like recruiting, performance, skill development, internal mobility, career pathing, and succession planning. These reports give you the insights you need to assess employee actions and behaviors, including turnover, cost and time to hire, training completions, skills gaps and needs, top talent, and career preferences.

According to Harvard Business Review and cited by Wharton, more than 70% of organizations now consider people analytics a high priority.³ While not exhaustive, ensure you have access to reports in these areas:

- ✓ Training compliance and completion
- ✓ Career mobility and internal growth
- ✓ Performance metrics
- ✓ Skills gap analysis

³ Knowledge at Wharton Staff. [“How People Analytics Can Change an Organization.”](#)
Knowledge at Wharton, Wharton School of Business, May 23, 2019



Artificial intelligence and generative AI

Look for a talent development solution that leverages artificial intelligence (AI) to deliver personalized, data-driven experiences across recruiting, upskilling, career pathing, and workforce planning. AI capabilities make it easier for your business to provide relevant, more targeted learning and career path recommendations for employees and leaders. It also delivers insights that align with your organizational objectives. In fact, according to the latest McKinsey Global Survey on the state of AI, 65% of respondents say their organizations are regularly using generative AI in at least one business function, up from one-third in 2023.⁴

Even more critical is that your solution uses ethical, responsible, and explainable AI. Guardrails must be in place to mitigate risks like hallucination and bias, ensuring you’re providing trustworthy recommendations to your people and making data-driven decisions. Ultimately, you need to use AI and workforce data to drive efficiency across administrative tasks, speed up the time it takes to complete routine processes, and offer tailored, personalized employee experiences. This can show up in the form of:

- ✓ Personalized job and skill recommendations
- ✓ Intelligent skills framework
- ✓ Access to labor market data
- ✓ Ethical AI practices with data privacy controls

⁴ Issler, Mena, Lareina Yee, Michael Chui, and Roger Roberts. [“McKinsey Technology Trends Outlook 2024.”](#)
McKinsey Digital, McKinsey & Company, July 16, 2024



Services and support

As a growing organization, having dependable support and access to professional services is invaluable when adopting new technology. Look for a solution that offers flexible support options, like dedicated account managers, training resources, and consulting services so you can ensure a smooth implementation and ongoing success. Whether it helps with system integration, employee training, or maximizing the use of your new tools, reliable support can make a big difference in how quickly your team adapts to and benefits from the new system.

- ✓ Consulting for seamless, fast setup and implementation
- ✓ Dedicated account manager for tailored support
- ✓ Flexible training options for quick onboarding
- ✓ 24/7 support via support, email, and phone



2

Ask potential vendors the right questions and know what success looks like

Mobilize training and upskill employees at scale

Questions to ask the vendor about how they can help your organization deliver personalized training and learning and accelerate your time-to-value.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 How does the platform support rapid training deployment to large groups while maintaining quality?	 Implements quickly and efficiently delivers consistent, high-quality training to employees, ensuring everyone receives the same learning experience and skill-building opportunities.
 Can I customize training content to address specific skills required across departments or teams?	 Enables tailored training that aligns with departmental needs, allowing employees to build relevant skills that support team and organizational objectives.
 Does the platform offer capabilities for role-based learning paths to accelerate skill development across different employee levels?	 Facilitates structured, role-specific learning journeys that empower employees to progress and upskill effectively, strengthening talent pipelines across the organization.

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 Reporting and analytics



Mobilize training and upskill employees at scale

Questions to ask the vendor about how they can help your organization deliver personalized training and learning and accelerate your time-to-value.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 How easily can managers monitor and track progress on team training and skill development at scale?	 Provides intuitive tracking and reporting tools that allow managers to oversee team skill progression, helping to identify strengths and development areas at scale.
 Does the platform provide insights into training impact on overall team performance and upskilling success?	 Offers comprehensive analytics to link training initiatives with team performance, allowing leaders to assess ROI and refine programs for continuous improvement in skill development.

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Performance management and succession planning

Questions to ask potential vendors about aligning employee goals and the succession planning process with organizational objectives.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 Are employees able to align their goals with organizational objectives?	 Aligns employee and organizational goals to increase transparency, drive targeted development conversations, and improve the performance review process.
 Does your talent solution encourage ongoing feedback?	 Nurture feedback via structured pathways like 1:1 check-ins or socially via visible badges that foster a culture of recognition & celebration.
 Can the platform facilitate continuous feedback and track progress on employee goals?	 Offers tools for real-time feedback and goal tracking, helping employees stay aligned with objectives and allowing managers to support ongoing development.
 How does the platform identify high-potential employees for succession planning?	 Provides skills insights into employee performance and potential, enabling recognition of high-potential talent and plan for future leadership needs.
 Does the platform help in creating personalized development plans based on employee performance and career goals?	 Supports individualized development plans that align with both employee strengths and organizational goals, encouraging growth and long-term retention.
 How can the platform assist in planning for key role transitions to maintain business continuity?	 Facilitates succession planning by identifying critical roles and potential successors, ensuring a smooth transition process, and minimizing disruption.

Internal mobility and career pathing

Questions to ask potential vendors about retaining top talent and empowering mobility from within.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 How does the platform support employees in exploring internal job opportunities that align with their skills and career goals?	 Provides visibility into available roles and career paths within the organization, helping employees identify and pursue opportunities that match their aspirations and skill sets.
 Can the platform help managers and HR identify employees who are ready for lateral or upward moves?	 Offers insights into employee readiness for new roles, enabling managers to support career growth and fill internal positions with qualified candidates.
 How does the platform facilitate career pathing to help employees understand potential growth opportunities?	 Maps out clear career paths , guiding employees on the steps and skills needed for advancement and fostering engagement and long-term commitment to the organization.
 Does the platform support skill assessments to align employees' capabilities with career opportunities?	 Provides tools for assessing current skills and identifying areas for development, helping employees prepare for desired roles, and supporting effective internal mobility.
 How does the platform track and measure the success of internal mobility initiatives?	 Tracks movement within the organization and measures impact on employee satisfaction and retention, allowing HR to refine programs and enhance career development support.

Unifying HR data and processes

Questions to ask potential vendors about consolidating systems and automating processes across admin, back office, and talent.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 How does the platform support the adoption of a unified, easy-to-administer learning system that integrates seamlessly with HRIS and other workflow tools?	 Adopts a unified and easy-to-administer learning platform that streamlines data flow with HRIS and other workflow tool integrations, enhancing data consistency and user experience.
 Can the platform consolidate data from multiple HR systems into a single source of truth for all HR functions?	 Centralizes data across HR systems , creating a reliable source of truth that improves data accuracy and facilitates more informed decision-making.
 Does the platform enable consistent workflows across administrative, back-office, and talent management functions?	 Provides streamlined workflows across various HR areas, reducing manual data handling and enabling HR teams to focus on strategic goals.
 How does the platform support unified reporting and analytics across HR functions to improve visibility?	 Offers comprehensive reporting tools that consolidate metrics across functions, providing clear insights into organizational health and trends from a single dashboard.
 How does the platform ensure data accuracy and consistency across HR processes and reduce redundancies?	 Synchronizes data across systems , maintaining accuracy and consistency, which supports reliable planning and reduces errors in HR operations.



Implementation, Integrations, and Go-Live

Questions to ask potential vendors about the type of support you can expect during your implementation and go-live journey.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 What resources and support will be available to assist with the planning and implementation process?	 Provides a dedicated implementation team and structured project management resources to guide planning, ensuring a smooth setup and minimizing disruptions.
 Can you provide a detailed timeline and roadmap for implementation, including key milestones and checkpoints?	 Delivers a clear, step-by-step roadmap with milestones, giving stakeholders visibility into progress and a clear understanding of key phases for successful implementation.
 How does the vendor support data migration, and what assistance do you provide to ensure data accuracy during this process?	 Offers comprehensive data migration support with validation checks to maintain data integrity, minimizing risks and ensuring accurate transfer.
 What integration capabilities does the platform have with existing systems, and how will you support us in establishing these integrations?	 Provides robust integration options with common HRIS and workflow systems, with dedicated technical support to streamline setup and ensure seamless data flow.

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Implementation, Integrations, and Go-Live

Questions to ask potential vendors about the type of support you can expect during your implementation and go-live journey.

Questions to ask potential vendors	What success looks like
 What specific training will be provided to our team to ensure smooth system adoption prior to going live?	 Delivers tailored training sessions and onboarding resources, empowering the team with the skills needed to manage the platform confidently from day one.
 How does the vendor handle potential issues that arise during the go-live phase, and what support is in place to quickly resolve them?	 Offers dedicated go-live support with rapid-response troubleshooting to address any issues immediately, ensuring a smooth transition with minimal downtime.
 What type of post-go-live support can we expect, and are there dedicated resources for ongoing troubleshooting and optimization?	 Provides ongoing support through a dedicated customer success team, along with access to resources for continuous learning, optimization, and troubleshooting.
 How does the vendor ensure minimal disruption to daily operations during the implementation, integration, and go-live phases?	 Employs a phased rollout approach to minimize impact on day-to-day activities, with careful planning to ensure business continuity throughout the process.

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Utilize this capabilities checklist

Ongoing learning and upskilling

- Personalized learning and development paths
- On-demand training and microlearning
- Mentorships and project and gig-based work
- Skills gap identification and analysis
- Curriculum
- Certification program
- Communities (learn from and engage with other customers)
- Instructor-led, virtual, collaborative classrooms
- Skills ontology

Performance management

- Reviews
- Goal-Setting
- Check-Ins
- Competency assessments
- Observation checklists
- Development plans
- 360-Feedback
- Engagement surveys

Succession planning

- Employee career profiles, preferences
- Leadership pipeline visualization (succession snapshot)
- Talent pools
- Talent search
- 9-box grid (assess high-potentials, at risk)

Career pathing

- Personalized career pathways based on aspirational roles
- AI-recommended learning, mentors, projects
- Match score to job roles
- Skills gap for roles and vacancies
- Internal talent sourcing
- In-app reporting, analytics

HR

- Employee records
- Historical data tracking
- Forms and workflows
- Planning and benchmarking
- Headcount reporting
- HR analytics
- HR integrations (HRIS)

Reporting and analytics

- In-app reporting, operational & experiential data
- Unified data insights

4

Ensure effective implementation and service support

On-Demand services, support, and training ensure your continued success — from implementation to onboarding to optimization. To ensure you select a vendor that offers a best-in-class customer experience, ask if they provide the following:



Services – Assess whether the vendor offers support across all areas, including strategy, design, configuration recommendations, migration stages, data transfer, employee adoption, and ongoing administration tailored to your unique needs and goals.



Customer success – Find out whether you can have a dedicated customer success manager as your trusty resource throughout your implementation and training as you and your organization grow and face new challenges.



Training and education – Your recommended vendor should offer 24/7 on-demand and up-to-date training courses, release updates and resources, and certification programs to ensure you're always able to get the support you need to be successful.



Peer communities – Evaluate whether the vendor provides customer portals that foster peer-to-peer dialogue, feedback, Q&A, and best practices so you can deepen your knowledge and maximize your investment.



Thought leadership and advisory services – Your recommended vendor should provide you with consultative and expert guidance to support your overall strategy. This can be in the form of in-person or virtual meetings, business case development, engagement best practices, and live webinars.

5

Make the business case (to your leaders) for a new talent development solution

- ✦ Identify the business objective and make your recommendation
- ✦ Outline the transition process
- ✦ Share your evaluation process
- ✦ Provide a summary of expected results and secure executive buy-in

Present a clear, compelling recommendation that highlights the anticipated return and specific benefits. Outline a cost-effective transition process and demonstrate how the new solution drives efficiency, improves employee performance, and supports long-term goals. Engage key stakeholders early to secure buy-in, ensuring alignment with broader business objectives and increasing chances of approval.

1. Identify the business objective and make your recommendation.

Every successful initiative begins with a clear goal. Consider the following:

- Are you challenged with maximizing your workforce productivity?
- How are company-led and self-led trainings a priority as they pertain to both risk mitigation and skill building?
- How do you build a more skilled workforce to meet future demands?
- Are you aiming to improve retention while driving internal mobility and hiring?
- Is there an opportunity to better unify HR data and processes?

Connect your L&D and HR activities to broader organizational strategies and map them to priority business growth objectives your leadership cares about.

KEY TIPS

- ✦ Demonstrate how your proposal will **decrease time-to-productivity** and **increase learning program efficiency** while **mitigating compliance risk**.
- ✦ Emphasize its ability to **retain employees** and **reduce hiring costs** by driving engagement via upskilling, personalized career paths, and AI-powered learning recommendations.
- ✦ Showcase more **accurate decision-making** and **reduced time spent** on admin tasks.
- ✦ Highlight how it positions you for future growth with a **resilient and agile workforce**, and a solution that can **scale** with the organizations needs moving forward.

2. Outline the transition process.

Bring in essential stakeholders from HR, Learning and Development, and IT as early as possible. Their insights will help shape the rollout and ensure everyone aligns on objectives. For growing teams with limited resources, it's especially important to establish a straightforward launch plan with a realistic timeline and clear responsibilities. This will help ensure that each member of your team understands their role and how they'll contribute to a smooth transition.

Work with your vendor to partner on a project roadmap that includes key milestones and checkpoints for setup, migration, and company-wide adoption. This roadmap keeps everyone on track and provides a clear view of progress, making it easier to address any challenges early.

KEY PROJECT IDENTIFIERS

-  **Timeline** – Set a practical timeline that reflects both deployment and adoption. This helps executives see when they'll need resources and what to expect at each stage.
-  **Milestones** – Define specific milestones that highlight progress, such as completion of onboarding or initial boosts in employee engagement.
-  **Vendor Support** – Emphasize how the chosen vendor will support your team throughout the transition. Look for vendors who provide continuous, on-demand support, training, and optimization resources to ease the burden on your internal team.





3. Share your evaluation process.

As you evaluate vendors, document how each one meets or falls short of your goals and organization's key priorities, as well as identify the key challenges that helped you determine the requirements so you can clearly present the rationale for your final recommendation.

BEST PRACTICES

- 👍 **Define key priorities**, focusing on outcomes that align with organizational goals.
- 👍 **Establish clear evaluation criteria** and develop a scoring system to rate vendors on critical areas, including usability, integrations and extensibility, reporting and analytics, and artificial intelligence and generative AI.
- 👍 **Prepare a summary** that captures how you assessed each vendor and why you made the final recommendation.

4. Provide a summary of expected results and secure executive buy-in

Executives want to see measurable results. Identify key metrics tied to the organizational goal, such as increased employee engagement, reduced time-to-hire, or improved internal mobility (and higher promotion rates), then make sure you have a way to track and report on those key metrics. Set expectations for regular updates that demonstrate the impact of your talent development solution post-launch. This can help you (and your executives) evaluate the ROI of your talent program and ensure you continue to get the budget each year.

TIPS TO SECURE EXECUTIVE BUY-IN

- ✳️ **Present your business case** – Clearly demonstrate how your recommended vendor's solution helps meet organizational goals like operational efficiency and talent retention.
- ✳️ **Show the ROI** – Leverage existing customer case studies, testimonials from similar organizations, and proof from customer surveys to show tangible results and solution benchmarks (e.g., increased retention rates, internal promotion rates, reduced time-to-hire, reduced hiring costs, improved performance post-training, etc.).
- ✳️ **Highlight competitive advantage** – Point out how your recommended vendor's usability, flexibility and extensibility, reporting and analytics, and AI-powered innovations can give your organization a competitive edge in attracting and retaining talent.

🔄 **By following this framework, you can be well prepared to champion your new solution, which is what your organization needs to drive a unified talent development strategy.**

About Cornerstone

For over 20 years, Cornerstone has been helping people learn and grow at work. We enable talent leaders to create a work environment that inspires growth, productivity, and success for all. Because when people are at their best, organizations are at their best.

At Cornerstone, we understand the challenges organizations face in today's rapidly evolving talent landscape. Today, more than 7,000 customers and 140 million global users in 180 countries use our AI-powered, skills-forward, experiential platform to power their future-ready workforce with a system that works for everyone. We deliver a unified, extensible platform with 200+ integrations and 45K skills in 35 languages and are the undisputed leader in learning and talent. 2024 awards include Fosway Research 9-Grid Learning Systems, Forrester Research Wave for LMS and LXPs, and Aragon Research Globe for Corporate Learning. For more information about Cornerstone's unified talent development solution, visit www.csod.com.

7,000 customers and
140 million users in
186 countries

45K skills in **35** different
languages for AI-driven
personalization

200+ integrations
with our
open platform

14 top analyst reports rank
Cornerstone
as leader (2023)



Appendix

How to compare vendors cheat sheet

Here is a step-by-step guide to help you efficiently compare vendors and determine your recommendation based on data. This due diligence can support your conversations with stakeholders and lock in executive buy-in.

1

Rate each functional area by core attributes (quarter of a circle, 1/2 of a circle, 3/4 of a circle, full circle)

				
Talent acquisition and recruiting				
Usability				
Integrations and extensibility				
Reporting and analytics				
Artificial intelligence and generative AI				
Continuous learning, upskilling, and performance management				
Usability				
Integrations and extensibility				
Reporting and analytics				
Artificial intelligence and generative AI				
Internal mobility, career pathing, and succession planning				
Usability				
Integrations and extensibility				
Reporting and analytics				
Artificial intelligence and generative AI				

2

Compare pricing and total cost of technology and ownership

Vendors often price their solutions depending on the scope of features offered. Some may charge a per-user fee, while others may offer tiered pricing based on the size of your organization. Here's what to look for:

- Q **Upfront costs** – Compare the initial setup fees, implementation support, and licensing fees. Some vendors may require custom integrations, which can add to the cost.
- Q **Ongoing costs** – Beyond the initial purchase, consider ongoing maintenance fees, customer support costs, and any future upgrades you might need. Also, determine whether there are additional costs for expanding user licenses as your organization grows.
- Q **Cost savings from vendor consolidation** – If the vendor provides an all-in-one solution, you can save money by reducing the number of separate point solutions for recruiting, learning, performance management, talent marketplace, and succession planning.

4

Assess vendor stability and innovation

Choosing a tenured, forward-thinking vendor is crucial for long-term success. Here's what to consider:

- Q **Reputation** – Research the vendor's reputation in the industry. Look for reviews, case studies, and third-party evaluations from trusted sources like Gartner or Forrester.
- Q **Product roadmap** – Ask the vendor about their product roadmap and upcoming features. Vendors that continually innovate are more likely to meet your future needs, especially as your organization scales.
- Q **Customer base** – Evaluate whether the vendor has a broad customer base, including organizations of similar size or industry to yours. This can indicate whether their solution is a good fit for your specific requirements.

3

Analyze implementation, services support, and customer community

Effective support can make or break the success of your migration or implementation. Here's how to assess vendor support:

- Q **Implementation support** – Check if the vendor offers comprehensive onboarding, training, and consulting services. A good vendor can provide clear implementation timelines and resources to ensure a smooth setup.
- Q **Ongoing support** – Look at the level of ongoing support provided, including whether the vendor offers 24/7 customer support, dedicated account managers, or regular product updates.
- Q **Training resources** – The vendor should offer detailed, on-demand training resources, such as webinars, manuals, and FAQs, that allow HR teams and employees to get the most out of the solution.
- Q **Customer community** – A vendor's customer community enables you to connect with other organizations facing similar challenges, share best practices, and gain insights into optimizing platform usage. This network can help accelerate onboarding, reduce learning curves, and encourage innovation by providing real-world examples and proven strategies from similar businesses.

5

Request demos and trials

Once you've shortlisted vendors, request demos and specific use-case scenarios to align with your current business processes. This allows you to evaluate:

- Q **Real-world usability** – Let key stakeholders interact with the solution to assess usability, performance, and navigation.
- Q **Feature testing** – Test core functionalities, like recruiting tasks, training and content management, performance reviews and goal-setting, career pathing, succession planning, and reporting, based on your organization's specific needs.