FUTURE TALENT COUNCIL

Future Talent Insight Brief

From Answers to Judgement: Rethinking Early Career Talent Assessment in an AI World

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Pillar 1: Defining Human-Centric Skills in an AI World

As AI automates an expanding range of routine and knowledge-based tasks, organisations across sectors increasingly recognise that the skills least replicable by machines are the ones that now define competitive early-career talent. As Dumitru and Halpern (2023), drawing on Elkeiy's United Nations report (2022), argue, the capabilities that machines cannot yet fully replicate, such as strategic thinking, problem-solving, empathy, ethics, and emotional intelligence, are dependent on human judgment. These skills require a level of adaptability and human understanding that AI is not able to currently match. As a result, terms such as "critical thinking" and "adaptability" now appear frequently across graduate competency frameworks and job descriptions. In many organisations, these attributes are also used as indicators of "high potential" talent, shaping recruitment, promotion pathways, and leadership development programmes. Despite their prominence, these skills are still difficult to clearly define and measure. Before examining how organisations attempt to assess them, it is important to establish what the research actually means by these terms.

The most widely adopted academic definition originates from Facione's (1990) landmark Delphi study, a consensus of 46 expert scholars convened by the American Philosophical Association, which defined critical thinking as "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference." Building on this, Halpern (1998) offered a more applied framing in American Psychologist, defining critical thinking as purposeful, goal-directed reasoning involved in "solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions." Both definitions share an important implication: critical thinking is not a personality trait or simply a proxy for intelligence, but a cognitive process that can, in principle, be taught, developed, and assessed. This distinction matters because it shifts the focus from who possesses these skills to how they can be identified and measured.

Global workforce data confirms the urgency of addressing this issue. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2025), based on responses from over 1,000 companies representing more than 14 million workers across 55 economies, found that analytical thinking has remained the most sought-after core skill for three consecutive editions, with seven in ten employers identifying it as essential. However, employer expectations remain significantly misaligned with graduate preparedness. Hart Research Associates (2018), surveying 501 business executives, found that although 78% identified critical thinking as the skill they most valued in employees, only 34% believed graduates were adequately prepared in this area, representing the largest skills gap identified in the study. What makes this more striking is that it predates the recent acceleration of generative AI. Together, these findings show that while these skills are increasingly valued in the AI-driven workforce, organisations and educational institutions still struggle to define, assess, and develop them consistently.

What makes this gap even more concerning is that it exists even when organisations try to measure critical thinking directly. Trikoili et al. (2025) found that trained evaluators using the same rubric on a critical thinking task still scored responses quite differently, especially as the tasks became more complex. This suggests that if organisations cannot consistently recognise critical thinking, it becomes difficult to assess, develop, or reward fairly. The following sections explore the limitations of current assessment methods and what a more effective approach could look like.

Pillar 2: Rethinking What We Assess

Prior to the rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), employers would evaluate candidates based on a mix of results-based and thinking-based criteria. However, with the rise of GenAI and online job applications, employers have focused much more on the thinking process of the applicant rather than their credentials. The reasons for this are two-fold.

First is that job definitions and requirements are changing. Employers are no longer looking for the same skills they once were. More emphasis is being placed on analytical thinking and the ability to solve complex problems. For example, the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2025) documented that employers expect 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030. This creates risk and uncertainty on the employer's side, and in order to make up for that, employers are looking for employees who are able to fill in that gap. Finding employees who can adapt to shifting circumstances and make logical decisions when faced with new problems makes all the difference.

Second is the accessibility and widespread use of AI within modern academic contexts. According to a recent global student survey across 15 countries, roughly 80% of college students now use AI on a regular basis (Chegg, Inc., 2025). With this increase, it means that the grades and perhaps even the resumes of many current college graduates are heavily influenced by the use of artificial intelligence. This makes these data points less helpful in determining the strength and fit of a candidate. So given that these more traditional criteria are no longer as helpful as they once were, what are employers now using to evaluate candidates?

Pillar 3: Evolving Assessment Methods

In recent years, employers have begun shifting toward assessment methods that measure judgment, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving in more realistic environments. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2025) reports that the use of college GPA in screening has decreased from 70.1 percent to 46.4 percent over the past 9 years, and problem solving skills (88.3%) and the ability to work in a team (81%) are employers' most sought after attributes in a resume. This gestures toward the move away from results-based evaluations.

One of the most significant trends is the growing use of simulation-based assessments. According to the World Economic Forum (2025), employers increasingly value skills such as analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility, leadership, and creative problem-solving, all of which are difficult to assess through traditional interviews. Simulations and work-sample tests allow candidates to demonstrate these capabilities in contexts that closely resemble real job situations.

Organizations are also moving toward case-based and scenario-driven evaluations. Research from Schmidt and Hunter (1998), one of the most cited studies in personnel assessment, found that work-sample tests are among the strongest predictors of future job performance because they measure how candidates perform tasks similar to those required in the role. Rather than focusing on whether a candidate arrives at the "correct" answer, these assessments reveal how individuals structure problems, evaluate trade-offs, and make decisions under uncertainty.

Two other emerging practices are collaborative (where candidates complete tasks in a group) and iterative assessments (where candidates receive new information and have to

revise their thinking).

Looking ahead, assessment methods will likely become more immersive, cognitive-based, dynamic, and reflective of real-world work. The organizations best positioned to identify future talent will be those that evaluate not only what candidates know, but also how they think, learn, collaborate, and adapt when faced with unfamiliar challenges. This does not mean getting rid of the older criteria, but rather supplementing them with ones more specialized for the current historical context. While progress has been made in this area, more work needs to be done in developing evaluation criteria that can make these characteristics more visible in candidate selection.

Pillar 4: Integrating AI into the Evaluation Process

As AI tools become standard in software development workflows, companies face a fundamental tension: how do you evaluate a candidate's genuine capabilities when AI can both augment and obscure them? The answer, increasingly, is to stop treating AI as a threat to assessment integrity and start treating it as the subject of assessment itself.

Organisations have adopted three broad stances on AI use during assessments: prohibiting it to isolate baseline knowledge, permitting it as table stakes, or actively testing how candidates use it. The prohibition model is losing credibility in IT contexts. According to a 2024 survey of over 900 business leaders by ResumeBuilder, 83% of companies already use AI to screen resumes and 69% plan to use it for candidate assessments by end of 2025 (ResumeBuilder.com, 2024) — signalling a sector-wide normalisation of AI throughout the hiring cycle. Meanwhile, a parallel survey of 1,005 hiring managers found that 88% say they can detect AI-assisted applications, yet only 54% penalise it (Insight Global & Atomik Research, 2024) — revealing that tolerance has outpaced consistent evaluation policy.

The 2024 Microsoft and LinkedIn Work Trend Index, drawing on 31,000 respondents across 31 countries, found that 66% of business leaders would not hire someone without AI skills, and 71% would choose a less experienced candidate with AI proficiency over a more experienced one without it (Microsoft & LinkedIn, 2024). The PwC Global AI Jobs Barometer (2025) reinforces the urgency: skills are evolving 25% faster in AI-exposed roles such as software development, and jobs requiring AI skills command a 56% wage premium (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2025).

The most significant shift for graduates is the move from output-based to process-based assessment. Leading tech firms are adopting sandbox environments where candidates complete real development tasks with full access to AI tools, and are evaluated on their reasoning, validation, and critical judgement — not on final answers alone. In the IT sector, some companies deliberately present flawed AI-generated code for candidates to debug and improve, directly testing the analytical capabilities that AI cannot replicate. For employers more generally, demonstrating that a candidate can critique, refine, and set limits on AI output is becoming a core technical signal — one that distinguishes critical AI fluency from passive dependency.

Pillar 5: Moving from Hiring to Continuous Validation

The hiring decision is increasingly best understood as a hypothesis - one that the first months of employment either confirm or complicate. If judgment, critical thinking, and adaptability cannot be fully detected through pre-hire assessments alone, then early employment must itself become a structured space for ongoing discovery. The question shifts from who do we hire to how do we keep finding out who we hired.

The stakes are real. SAP SuccessFactors' 2026 AI Talent Survey found that 79% of Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) report early-career talent now receives enterprise AI tools within their first month on the job - yet 38% of those same leaders worry that foundational skills like critical thinking, judgment, and collaboration are not being built (Albert, 2026). Productivity and development are moving in opposite directions, and most post-hire evaluation frameworks are only capturing the first.

Junior employees interviewed across financial services, communications and media, and technology firms in the MENA region gave texture to this gap. A junior analyst at a financial services multinational put it plainly: "I get feedback on whether the output was right. I don't really get feedback on whether I was thinking about it the right way."

This is the central failure of most post-hire evaluation: it remains oriented toward outcomes and largely silent on the reasoning that produced them. According to one source, HR managers rely primarily on performance reviews (46%), manager feedback (36%), and skills gap analysis (34%) to track development - methods that are retrospective and dependent on individual managerial attention rather than structured systems (TalentLMS, 2024). Research from the Brandon Hall Group finds that strong onboarding processes do produce measurably better retention and productivity outcomes (HRChief, 2025), but structured onboarding and structured thinking-quality feedback are not the same thing, and most organisations only invest in the former.

Effective feedback loops require more than collection and analysis; they require action and visible follow-through. For early-career employees navigating AI-augmented roles, feedback that arrives late or addresses only task correction misses the window. Patterns of over-reliance on AI output, or failure to validate it, can entrench quickly if left unaddressed. Junior interviewees consistently described wanting feedback that went deeper: "I want someone to tell me not just that the answer was wrong, but what kind of thinking got me there," said a junior product associate at a tech firm in Dubai. "That's the thing I can actually change."

Stretch assignments and role rotations offer the most direct vehicle for observing judgment in action - exposing early-career employees to unfamiliar decisions, genuine uncertainty, and the need to ask for help strategically. But a meta-analysis by Mlekus and Maier (2021) cautions that rotations do not produce development automatically; their value depends on structured reflection and debriefing, not exposure alone. Several junior employees described rotations that felt like task redistribution rather than growth. One described the inverse experience - a single structured debrief after a cross-functional project - as the most formative moment of their first year: "My manager sat with me and asked what I would have done differently. That one conversation taught me more about how I think than anything else."

The broader implication is clear. Organisations must stop treating the first year of employment as orientation and start treating it as structured developmental evaluation - with explicit goals, feedback mechanisms that examine thinking quality alongside outputs, and reflection built into the rhythm of work. As SAP's research concludes, organisations that navigate this transition successfully will ensure early talent "doesn't just ramp up faster, but also builds the judgment, collaboration, and critical-thinking skills that AI can't replace" (Albert, 2026). Hiring is not the end of the assessment. It is where the real assessment begins.

Conclusion

The widespread use of generative AI has brought with it several side effects, many of which are now creeping into the realm of early career talent selection. Despite the difficulties

AI has brought for employers, there is no denying its long-lasting future in academic and occupational contexts. Employers and candidates alike will have to learn how to better handle the problems produced by AI. Going forward, it is recommended that leaders 1) evaluate how candidates use AI, not whether they can use it, 2) replace static interviews with simulation-based assessments, and 3) hire for thinking, not output. Further it is suggested that students and upcoming candidates 1) use AI critically: validate, refine, and question its outputs, 2) improve reasoning and decision-making abilities, and 3) get comfortable with ambiguity and open-ended questions. While the road ahead is uncertain one thing is for sure: the future belongs to those who can assess how candidates think, not just what they produce.

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