

Investing in the Next Generation: Preparing Workforce Ready Girls to Lead and Thrive

Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan August 2026 White Paper



Executive Summary

The realities of the workforce are changing rapidly, with significant advances in artificial intelligence and automation, the rise of hybrid and remote work, and evolving career expectations. This is changing what young adults need to succeed. Technical knowledge is important to employers, but both young people and organizations recognize the enduring importance of interpersonal abilities, such as communication, critical thinking, adaptability, leadership, and relationship building.

These durable skills are developed throughout childhood and adolescence. They grow through supportive relationships and repeated opportunities to make decisions, solve problems, work with others, take on responsibility, and learn from setbacks.

Girl Scouts gives a place to practice these skills. Girls build confidence and practice leadership through girl-led activities, the Cookie Program, outdoor experiences, community service, and Highest Award projects. Through these experiences over time, girls learn that they can create change.

Preparing the future workforce is a shared responsibility. Youth-serving organizations must provide a strong foundation for youth growth. Employers must continue that development through mentorship, feedback, belonging, and allowing young workers to have meaningful responsibilities. Businesses and philanthropic partners must ensure that girls have access to the programs and relationships where this development begins.

By investing in girls today, we help build a workforce that is resilient and innovative, prepared to lead us through change.

Introduction

The future of the workforce is changing, influenced by artificial intelligence, automation, hybrid work, evolving career goals, and an increased emphasis on skills rather than credentials. Concurrently the experience of growing up has changed. Today's girls are developing in a world influenced constantly by digital connection, fewer opportunities for in-person interaction, rising loneliness and anxiety, economic uncertainty, and the pressure to be ready for professional jobs when they graduate high school and college. These patterns are closely connected, and as technology assumes more routine tasks in both our personal lives and the workplace, important human abilities, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, empathy, leadership, and relationship building, are becoming more important.

Younger workers recognize the importance of these soft skills, recognizing that communication, leadership, empathy, and networking are essential for career growth.ⁱ Young people are also entering the workforce with expectations beyond traditional goals of title and salary. They want opportunities to learn, contribute meaningfully, build supportive relationships, maintain their well-being, and achieve financial security.ⁱⁱ The expectations that young people have of “money, meaning, and well-being”ⁱⁱⁱ reflect a changing understanding of professional success and the realities of young workers' lives as they navigate economic uncertainty, the disruptions that new technology can bring, and less predictable career pathways.

Preparing young people for the workforce does not just start in college or someone's first job. Durable skills needed to be a successful professional are built over time through relationships, ongoing practice, and opportunities to make meaningful contributions throughout childhood and adolescence.^{iv} Youth also need the chance to experience responsibility and learn from setbacks, so they have resilience when they do enter their first job.

Employers also have a role to play in developing the young workforce. Young workers need an environment where they can continue to learn. Mentorship, feedback, practical learning, and opportunities to contribute meaningfully are integral to professional growth. In a changing professional environment, employers must be intentional about creating areas that provide these supports.

The responsibility to prepare young people to enter the professional world is a shared one. Youth-serving organizations can help young people develop the confidence, resilience, relationships, and durable skills they need as the foundation for adulthood. Employers can create environments in which these skills are welcomed and supported.

This paper examines how work has changed, how growing up has changed, what employers are seeing in newer workers, and how Girl Scouts and other youth serving organizations can prepare girls to become confident, adaptable, and capable contributors to the workforce and communities.

The new workforce requires technical fluency and durable human skills

The skills mix

While many of the necessary skills that employers seek in employees have remained consistent throughout time, we are currently experiencing a shift in the workplace. The top three fastest growing skills in earlier editions of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Future of Jobs Report* consistently included higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and complex problem solving.^v In the 2025 report, however, the three skills expected to grow the fastest between 2025-2030 changed significantly, now predicted to be AI and big data, networks and cybersecurity, and technological literacy.^{vi} While human skills are still among the top ten fastest growing^{vii}, this shift indicates how quickly the combination of capabilities that workers need can change.

People are already feeling the pressure of this change within their organizations. Employers expect 39% of workers' existing skill sets to change or become outdated by 2030, and 63% identify skill gaps as a major barrier to business transformation over the 2025-2030 period.^{viii} Workers similarly identify the need to adapt to the changing workplace. In a large-scale 2026 report, 77% of employees surveyed stated that their job security depended on continuous learning, with 75% responding that they were actively developing new skills for their career.^{ix} Technological skills, however, are only part of the larger picture.

Interpersonal skills and adaptive skills often described as "soft skills" remain extremely important in the workforce today, still among the fastest growing skill set needed through 2030 on WEF reports.^x America Succeeds, a nonprofit organization focused on workforce readiness, refers to these as "durable skills," skills like critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, fortitude, growth mindset and leadership.^{xi} These skills allow individuals to learn new tools, respond when faced with unexpected circumstances, collaborate with coworkers, and apply their existing technological knowledge effectively.

Employer research supports WEF findings about the continued relevance of interpersonal and transferable skills. National Association for College and Employer (NACE) surveys found that teamwork, communication, problem solving, initiative, and leadership consistently appear among the attributes that employers value most.^{xii} An analysis by America Succeeds similarly found that 76% of job postings require at least one durable skill, or transferable ability such as communication, collaboration, or adaptability that remains valuable across roles, industries, and stages of career.^{xiii}

Young people must demonstrate these skills earlier

Entering the job market can feel increasingly competitive and uncertain for young people today. In the first quarter of 2026 the unemployment rate of recent college graduates was about 5.7%, up two points over the last ten years.^{xiv} Although unemployment is only one measure of early-career experience, the increase illustrates the difficult environment that many young people encounter when entering the labor market.

The expectations of entry-level roles are changing, impacting young professional's entry into the job market. A PwC 2026 analysis suggests that AI is automating some junior-level routine tasks.^{xv} Previously, these routine tasks were the training ground for interpersonal and professional skills required in more senior leadership roles.^{xvi} With these tasks automated, many previously senior-level skills, such as judgment, creativity, leadership, and relationship building, as now required at the entry level, setting the bar higher for people newly entering the workforce.^{xvii}

In addition, to demonstrate a candidate's experience using these skills, employers are relying more heavily on a candidate's work experience to show they can apply the knowledge gained through degree and training programs. Some employers are going as far as to reduce degree requirements, or to supplement these requirements with assessments of work experience and technical capabilities.^{xviii} This can cause challenges for young people with limited formal work experience.

With the emphasis on skills and experience, youth need other settings where they can demonstrate the leadership, judgement, and problem-solving skills that the employers seek before their first job. Youth develop these skills throughout their life but need opportunities to explicitly practice them and showcase their abilities.

Girls are developing in a changed social environment

Developing skills as they grow

The importance of technology in girls' personal lives reflects the importance of technology in the workforce. Girls are now growing up in a world where this technology is an integral part of their childhood. 58% of children 5-8 years old have their own tablet, while 23% have their own phone by 8 years old.^{xix} When new technology emerges, youth are among the early adopters. 2025 Pew research found that 64% of U.S. teens ages 13-17 use AI chatbots, with about 30% using them daily.^{xx} By growing up in the current digital world, youth are already gaining the labor market's fastest growing skills.

The digital environments in which youth grow can provide girls with opportunities to practice creativity, to explore their identity, access information, connect with peers, and practice leadership.^{xxi} More than half of girls today are not only consumers of technology, but also digital leaders who "seek to improve their own lives and the world through their digital experiences and use of technology."^{xxii} As illustrated by the above WEF research, these digital skills will be invaluable to girls as they become young women and enter the job market. Digital fluency, however, is only one of the many skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

While digital environments offer youth some opportunities to practice the durable skills necessary to eventually apply their technical skills requires strong relationships and community.^{xxiii} The Search Institute developmental relationships framework identifies five elements of the developmental relationships necessary to support this type of development:

Express Care: Show me that I matter to you.

Challenge Growth: Push me to keep getting better.

Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Share Power: Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Expand Possibilities: Connect me with people and places to broaden my world.^{xxiv}

Research has shown that when youth experience these elements in relationships at home, school, and in their community, they demonstrate stronger social-emotional skills, greater personal responsibility, a clearer sense of purpose, stronger academic motivation, and a greater ability to set goals, communicate, collaborate, and persevere through challenges.

When youth are given consistent opportunities to have a say in decisions, they can practice how to methodically weigh choices and experience the consequences that follow. Experiencing support from adults as youth set and achieve goals shows them the planning and steps that go into the process and helps them gain confidence when they succeed in meeting those goals. Throughout all this practice, experiencing the reassurance that relationships provide when they fail builds resilience, and encourages safe risk taking.^{xxv} The result of these experiences provides a strong foundation for building durable skills.

In addition to the developmental relationships discussed above, young people thrive on peer-to-peer interaction. While community spaces, or "third spaces," separate from a child's home and school, are important in fostering this sense of community and belonging, they are much less common than they once were.^{xxvi} Girl Scouts USA's *State of the Girl* found that 52% of girls said that a friend encourages them to try new things, while 92% of girls ages 5-7 are more willing to take social risks when a friend is present.^{xxvii} Girls can be brave when they know they are not alone.

Trusted adults and peers help girls challenge themselves, take risks, and grow. Belonging gives girls the confidence to participate and practice their skills, which in time leads to competence and confidence. In a context with less community spaces, it is important to explore where youth can access these developmental relationships and community.

Opportunities to continue young women's development in the workplace

When provided with sufficient development opportunities in their childhood and youth, young people arrive at their first professional job with significant potential and some invaluable skills, but it is important to remember they are still developing. Even when a young professional had the opportunity to practice leadership, teamwork, and problem solving before starting their formal career, they do not necessarily know how those skills translate into the specific professional

context of their new workplace. The standards and expectations of a new workplace, specific organizational intricacies, and professional practices that more experienced professionals take for granted are learned over time in a professional context. An employers’ role is not only to find the best talent, but also to help young professionals to mold abstract abilities into professional capabilities.

Professional experience has historically been gained through routine tasks and observational supervision in their early career.^{xxxix} AI automating many of these routine tasks, and the recent transition from in-person work to hybrid and remote schedules have removed some of the tasks and pathways through which young workers typically learned the durable skills that are still required. The reduction in proximity-based learning has made it more difficult for young workers to develop these skills.^{xxx}

Similarly, workplace mentorship and regular feedback are not built-in the way they once were. New York Fed research found that physical proximity in working increased feedback and mentorship for younger workers.^{xxxi} Without this feedback, it is challenging for young workers to realize mistakes they make and continue improving and developing their skills. As discussed above, regular practice and clear feedback are important tools for the growth of young people’s development of interpersonal skills. A recent Gallup report survey also found that clarity is a current weakness in the workplace. Only 45% of workers under 35 reported clearly knowing what was expected of them at work.^{xxxii} This research also showed that young workers lagged in feeling cared about, connected to the mission of their organization, and being able to learn and grow.^{xxxiii}

While the context changes significantly when a young person becomes an adult and enters the workplace, development needs remain the same. Young people need belonging, trusted adults, voice and agency, supported challenge, feedback and reflection, and to feel that they’re making a meaningful contribution. While this needs to be purposefully structured in new workplace contexts, influenced by remote work and the introduction of AI, it is still very possible, and will benefit both young workers and the organization in which they work.

The practices will look different in the workplace, but the developmental purpose remains similar:

Ongoing developmental need	How workplaces can meet it
Belonging	Cohort onboarding, peer networks, inclusive team practices
Trusted adults	Managers and mentors who provide guidance and advocacy
Voice and choice	Meaningful input into work and appropriate level of autonomy
Supported challenge	Appropriately challenging assignments paired with clear expectations, resources, and guidance
Feedback and reflection	Frequent coaching, opportunities to learn from mistakes, and post-project reflection
Meaningful contribution	Real responsibility connected to team priorities and organizational goals

For example, creating a sense of belonging may require a more thoughtful and interactive onboarding process. Workplaces can use cohort-based onboarding to help young employees develop a sense of community as they enter the company. They can also provide planned and structured opportunities for connection, collaboration, and more informal learning. Gen Z workers (those born between 1995 and 2007) report a higher likelihood of remaining at a company for 5+ years when they report having a close friend at work.^{xxxiv} Whereas relationships may have developed on their own in the past, we cannot assume that they develop the same way in the current workplace.

Trusted relationships are integral to young professional development. Managers provide daily direction and feedback, mentors can help young professionals understand unfamiliar situations and build confidence, and both can advocate for young people when opportunities arise. Having these relationships within an organization gives early-career workers guidance, encouragement, and the organizational knowledge they need to become successful employees.

Voice and agency can be supported by asking young employees to contribute ideas, make decisions when appropriate, and understand how their work contributes to the organization. As the employees’ skills and confidence develop, managers can gradually increase their responsibility and autonomy.

Frequent feedback and opportunities for reflection can help young people learn from their early experiences as an employee. Annual performance reviews alone do not provide the real-time feedback employees need to adjust their approach and develop flexibility in their work. Regular coaching, especially after a project, presentation, or difficult experience, can help employees incorporate new learnings into their work.

Finally, young professionals need to feel like their work is important and worthwhile. Giving employees real responsibilities and showing them how those responsibilities connect to the organization's goals, builds confidence, motivation, and a sense of purpose for young workers. When workplaces create these opportunities, they develop young employees with potential into strong team members, while also improving retention and a stronger future leadership base for the organization.

Girl Scouts provides the practice ground for durable skills

Girl Scouts provides the important relationships and environment that help youth develop skills to be successful when entering supportive work environments, with the Girl Scout Leadership Experience (GSLE) closely reflecting necessary elements found in the research. Troop leaders and volunteers express care through the supportive long-term relationships built within troops. These relationships provide the trust and belonging needed to encourage girls to participate and challenge themselves.^{xxxv} Similarly, support is provided to help girls learn, practice receiving and responding to feedback in a safe environment, and practice goal setting and completion. This support is provided through structured adult guidance and the structure of the Girl Scout troop.^{xxxvi}

A unique element of Girl Scouts is the progressive challenges provided by the program. Badges and patches are set up sequentially, building on each other while pushing youth slightly more out of their comfort zone with each step. Outdoor challenges encourage girls to try things that they have not done before, and Highest Awards require more of the girls as they progress from Bronze to Silver to Gold.^{xxxvii} Through these experiences the GSLE emphasizes the importance of sharing power through the girl-led model. Girl Scouts build confidence through their ownership of the program and the different activities they create.

Finally, Girl Scouts expands the possibilities of young peoples' worlds. Through community projects, program mentors, and travel, young people learn about new careers, build networks that can help them as they enter the workforce, and are encouraged to set aspirational goals. By introducing girls to many different fields and opportunities, Girl Scouts allows children to see the possibilities outside of their day-to-day life and imagine their future in a new way.^{xxxviii} In meeting the GSLE outcomes of developing a strong sense of self, displaying positive values, seeking challenges, forming healthy relationships, and becoming community problem solvers, Girl Scouts become strong leaders with durable skills that are ready for the workforce.^{xxxix}

Girl Scouts experience this regularly during their time with the program, practicing and gaining confidence in their abilities. The outcomes we discuss above do not happen over a short period of time, but instead slowly develop through regular experiences. Youth find belonging among a supportive peer group and learn to trust this group over time. Youth build communication and teamwork skills, working through conflict and across differences while planning and participating in activities with their troops.

Girl Scouts build their voice in choosing and planning activities and projects. Leadership and initiative are built through regular hands-on and collaborate experiences, allowing girls to challenge themselves. Throughout all these experiences Girl Scouts are encouraged to reflect on challenges, uncertainty, and mistakes that occur. The adaptability and resilience learned through this process are carried forward into later parts of their life.

Problem-solving and project management are required when planning day-to-day activities within their troop but are explicitly required when a girl completes their Bronze, Silver, and Gold Award Projects. Gold Award projects require a project plan and explicit discussion of barriers and ways to address them during the project. When completing a Highest Award project, girls build relationships with each other and community members, always receiving guidance and feedback from mentors.

Girl Scouts builds durable skills because girls make choices, work with others, encounter challenges, and then try again with support. Youth development programs like this provide the context and developmental relationships needed to set girls up for success in the workplace. Developing as a young professional, however, does not stop when a young person is hired for their first job. It is important that young people have the right support in the workplace to continue their skill development.

Creating a workforce where girls can thrive

Workplace development of young people is necessary to build a robust workforce, but development of the skills needed for the workplace starts significantly before a person's new job. The foundation of these skills develops, with support, throughout a young person's life and with repetitive experiences, but young people need help connecting these skills they developed as youth to the workplace context.

A young person entering the workforce may not automatically recognize that the skills they used for their Gold Award project demonstrated project management experience, or that leading a group of peers demonstrated facilitation, delegation, and conflict resolution. Participating in the annual Girl Scout Cookie Sale involves goal setting, customer communication, and financial decision-making, but those things are not necessarily obvious to a young adult applying to their first job. Adults in young people's lives, as well as others involved in youth-serving organizations, can help girls reflect on their experiences and then translate the skills to resumes or in interviews. It is important that employers then recognize these leadership and community experiences as evidence of the skills required for the job and not focus only on paid employment experience.

Conclusion

Skill requirements within the workforce are continually changing, but it is important to remember that the workforce consists of the capabilities of the individuals within. Specific technical skills and consistently changing, but some durable skills, such as communication and problem-solving, continue to be important over time. Youth build these skills throughout their child and teenager years, repeatedly participating in relationships and experiences that provide them with belonging, challenges, autonomy, support, feedback, and responsibility.

Preparing young people to be successful professionals is a shared responsibility. Youth serving organizations must provide opportunities for belonging, leadership, collaboration, and supported challenge. Young people develop these skills over time and are more successful in life if they have these experiences. Employers must provide them with the next stage of practice, focusing on mentorship, feedback, supporting young professionals as they learn the specifics of a professional workplace, and increasing responsibility over time. Finally, businesses and philanthropies help to ensure that young people have equitable access to the community organizations, spaces, relationships, and experiences where this development begins.

With this support girls gain the confidence and capability to successfully enter an ever-changing workforce. Employers gain adaptable professionals prepared to learn and contribute to an organization's mission, and the workforce becomes more successful and forward-facing. When we provide the framework and support needed, young people do not have to fit into an outdated workforce but can create a forward-thinking and successful environment where emerging talent thrives.

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