



AI Skills Are Becoming a Must-Have for Canadian Employers

Companies increasingly want candidates who can apply AI effectively in the workplace, not simply use the technology.

TORONTO, Sept. 23, 2026 — Most Canadian employers expect at least a basic level of AI ability from job applicants and most job seekers say they possess the AI skills companies want, according to a recent Express Employment Professionals-Harris Poll survey.

Most job seekers (88%) say they have the AI skills employers want, however, only 23% believe companies expect advanced or expert capabilities. More than half of Canadian hiring managers (53%) say they expect candidates to have at least an intermediate level of AI skills, with 22% saying they are looking for candidates with advanced or expert skills.



AI proficiency isn't reserved for highly technical candidates, either. Eight in 10 hiring managers (80%) look for at least basic AI skills, and more than one third (34%) consider AI proficiency very important or absolutely essential when evaluating applicants.

AI Joins Traditional Hiring Priorities

Even as AI skills become a factor in hiring, job seekers believe employers still place the greatest value on long-standing workplace qualities. When asked which attributes companies consider absolutely essential in applicants, they ranked AI last:

- Ability to work in a team: 42%
- Work ethic: 42%
- Accountability: 41%
- Dependability: 41%
- Willingness to learn: 40%
- AI skills: 12%

What Employers Mean by AI-Ready

While job seekers may rank traditional qualities higher, hiring managers are looking for specific AI capabilities:

- Awareness of data privacy and security concerns: 31%
- Ability to evaluate AI outputs for quality and reliability: 30%
- Understanding bias in AI: 29%
- Ability to communicate AI findings or concepts clearly and effectively: 28%
- Ability to create useable prompts: 27%

Job seekers' assessments of their own abilities, however, vary widely by both generation and gender. Gen Z (38%) and millennial job seekers (36%) are much more likely to describe their AI skills as advanced or expert, compared with 13% of Gen X and 11% of baby boomers and seniors. Men are also more likely to report having advanced AI skills (33%) compared to 25% of women.

The generational divide is just as clear in what job seekers think employers want. Millennials (29%) and Gen Z job seekers (25%) are much more likely to believe companies expect advanced or expert AI skills, compared with 10% of Gen X and 12% of baby boomers and seniors.

"AI proficiency is moving from a nice-to-have to a foundational skill for many jobs," said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, president and chairman of Express Employment International. "Job seekers who invest in their own development now can gain practical experience and a better understanding of how to use the technology responsibly. Knowing how AI works is only part of the equation. Employees also need to know how to question its output, communicate what it produces and apply it effectively on the job."

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Survey Methodology

The Job Insights survey was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from May 15 to June 1, 2026, among 508 Canadian hiring decision-makers.

The Job Seeker Report was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from May 19 to June 8, 2026, among 508 Canadian adults ages 18 and older who are employed but looking for a new job or not employed and looking for work.

For full survey methodology, please contact Ana Curic at Ana@MapleLeafStrategies.com.

If you would like to arrange for an interview to discuss this topic, please contact Ana Curic at (613) 858-2622 or email Ana@MapleLeafStrategies.com.

About Robert (Bob) Funk Jr.

Robert (Bob) Funk Jr. is the Chief Executive Officer, President and Chairman of Express Employment International, a global staffing franchisor founded and headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He leads a portfolio of workforce solution brands, including the flagship Express Employment Professionals franchise, along with several affiliated brands serving specialized markets. The Express franchise brand is an industry-leading, international staffing company with franchise locations across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

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