



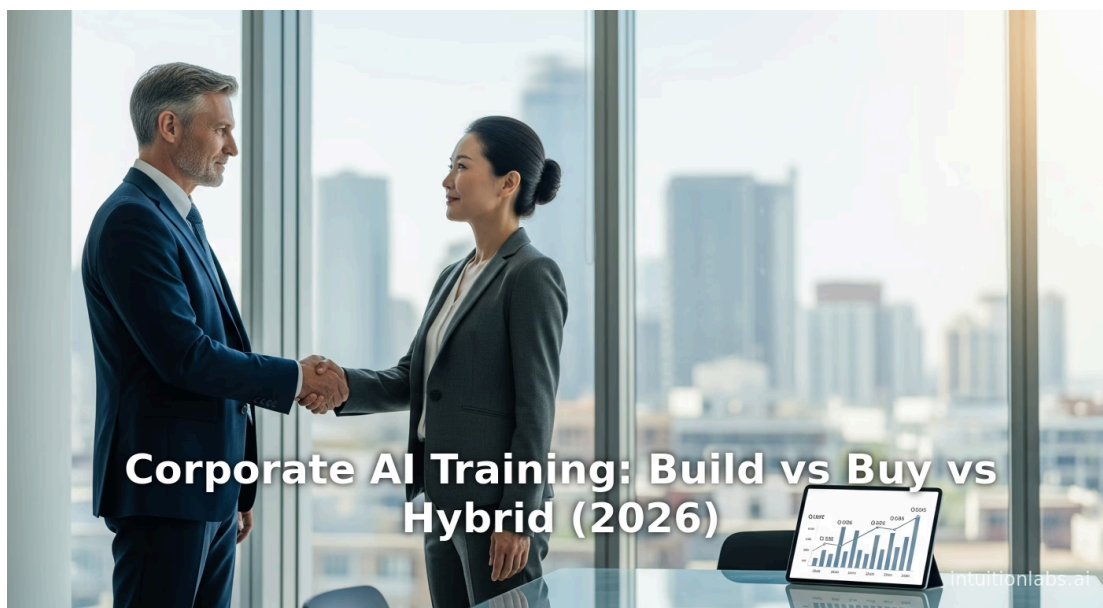
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Corporate AI Training: Build vs Buy vs Hybrid (2026)

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Executive Summary

As corporations grapple with the rapid advance of artificial intelligence (AI), **upskilling employees in AI is now a strategic imperative**. Global spending on corporate learning already exceeds **\$340–400+ billion annually** ([joshbersin.com](https://www.joshbersin.com)) ([joshbersin.com](https://www.joshbersin.com)), yet firms struggle to meet growing AI skill demands. BCG reported in its October 2024 analysis that only **6% of surveyed leaders said they had begun meaningful AI upskilling** (BCG). This is a historical survey result, not a 2026 adoption rate. Similarly, two-thirds of workers reported they would avoid employers lacking sufficient AI training programs (www.techradar.com), and over **60% of employees want their companies to provide AI training** (www.coursebox.ai).

Organizations face a fundamental choice in addressing this need: should they “**build**” AI training programs internally, “**buy**” them from external providers, or adopt a “**hybrid**” of both approaches? Each option entails distinct tradeoffs in cost, speed, customization, and control. The decision depends on factors such as budget, timeframe, content specificity, and scale. Our review finds:

- **Building In-House** allows **maximum customization and alignment** with corporate strategy and culture (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com), but requires substantial upfront investment and expertise (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com). For example, Lloyds Banking Group launched its own *AI Academy* to train all 67,000 employees, aiming for **100% upskilling by end of 2026** (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com) (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com). For an internal program, assess curriculum scope, learner numbers, staff capacity, review cycles, and platform requirements before estimating cost or launch time. Check employment agreements, third-party licences, and assignments before assuming ownership of the materials ([UK Intellectual Property Office](https://www.ukipo.gov.uk)). In-house training can also struggle with scalability and instructional design gaps (www.lmsportals.com).
- **Buying Third-Party** training (via external courses, MOOCs, or consultants) offers **speed and access to expertise** (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com). Large eLearning platforms and training providers (e.g. Coursera, Udemy, CompTIA) and industry consortia provide turnkey AI curricula. For

instance, CompTIA's "AI Essentials" course (Dec 2025) targets desk workers, addressing practical AI tool use (www.itpro.com). Cisco "Learn with Cisco" pledged to train 1 million Americans in AI/digital skills over four years (www.itpro.com). Buying can **scale quickly** and leverage best-practice content (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com), often at lower upfront cost. However, off-the-shelf programs may lack company-specific relevance and control (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com). Vendor lock-in, licensing fees, and contract renewal terms are concerns.

- **Hybrid Approaches** attempt to capture the benefits of both. Companies often build *core* training modules in-house (for proprietary processes or strategic topics) while **buying or outsourcing** specialized content (e.g. compliance, general AI literacy) (learningelements.com.au) (learningelements.com.au). Hybrid models can maintain **brand alignment and flexibility** (learningelements.com.au), yet require careful management of multiple vendors and consistent learner experience.

To inform strategy, we analyze these approaches in depth. Our report synthesizes current data on corporate learning and AI, evidence from recent industry research, and illustrative case studies. We include **detailed comparisons** (with tables) of build/buy/hybrid strategies, examining costs (including total cost of ownership), timelines, and outcomes. Over 60 citations from industry, academic, and practitioner sources are embedded throughout. Finally, we discuss implications for organizational outcomes and future trends (e.g. generative-AI-powered learning, immersive training), to guide decision-makers exploring corporate AI training programs in 2026 and beyond.

Introduction

Background and Context. Corporate learning and development (L&D) has evolved dramatically over the past decade. Once seen as ancillary, L&D is now recognized as a strategic driver of business performance. Globally, organizations spend on the order of **hundreds of billions** of dollars annually on training and upskilling (joshbersin.com) (joshbersin.com). Even during downturns, companies invest roughly \$1,200–\$1,500 per employee per year on L&D (joshbersin.com).

The AI Imperative. The rise of AI has intensified this focus. Widespread generative AI tools (like ChatGPT since late 2022) and increasing AI adoption in business have created an urgent "**AI skills gap**". For example, the Adecco/A.I. World Economic Forum reported that in late 2023 about **70% of workers** were already using AI tools at work (www.weforum.org), and **62%** expected a positive impact on their jobs. Employees **want** training: Adecco's CEO noted "a majority [of employees] want their organizations to train them" in AI (www.weforum.org). Meanwhile, corporate leaders see demand outpacing supply: A **February 2026 Josh Bersin study** found companies spend **\$400 billion** on learning and development, yet **74% admit they cannot meet** their demand for new skills (joshbersin.com). Bersin concludes that "our entire approach, philosophies, tech stack and operating models for learning are out of date" in the AI era (joshbersin.com).

This training gap has real consequences. Emergn's 2025 survey frames employer provision and individual initiative as compatible responsibilities: "Responsibility is expected to sit with employers, without absolving individuals." Its sample comprised 751 US and UK respondents, including executives and managers involved in operational change ([Emergn survey report](#)). Notably, **two in three workers** reported they would *avoid*

applying for a job if an employer offered *inadequate AI training* (www.techradar.com). Meanwhile, a Boston Consulting Group analysis notes only about **one-third of employees have been properly trained in AI**, with training associated with higher usage and confidence (www.bcg.com). The survey also reports benefits from reshaping AI workflows: BCG reports that early adopters of AI workflows see employees save significantly more time and focus on strategic work (www.bcg.com). Mercifully, AI offers solutions: generative AI can speed content creation by orders of magnitude, creating personalized learning in minutes (joshbersin.com) (www.airmeet.com).

Given this context, corporations face a critical decision: how to build AI capability among their workforces. Traditional L&D must adapt: **are new AI training programs built from scratch by internal teams, outsourced or licensed from vendors, or some combination?** This “**build vs. buy vs. hybrid**” debate is well known in technology strategy (e.g. build an internal system vs. buy software), but it is only now emerging in the specialized context of corporate AI training.

The goal of this report is a thorough analysis of these approaches to corporate AI training in 2026. We review market trends and data on AI-skills needs, outline the characteristics of each approach, present evidence and case examples of successes and challenges, and compare the trade-offs with quantitative and qualitative arguments. We also consider the broader organizational implications, including costs and cultural fit. Finally, we look ahead to future directions (e.g. AI-driven adaptive platforms, immersive simulations, skill taxonomies) that will shape how companies educate their employees in AI over the next decade.

Build, Buy, and Hybrid: Defining the Options

We begin by defining the three archetypes of corporate AI training programs:

- **Build (In-House Development):** The company **designs and develops its AI training program internally**. This might involve a dedicated team of instructional designers, data scientists, and subject-matter experts creating courses, workshops, or learning platforms tailored to the organization's context. Role-based learning paths can be created for different employee categories (e.g. *AI Users, Builders, Leaders* as in Lloyds's program (www.itpro.com)). Building in-house often means high initial investment in curriculum design, learning management systems, and staff time, but it promises maximum relevance and control.
- **Buy (Third-Party Solutions):** The company **purchases or licenses training content and services from external providers**. This can include subscribing to online learning platforms (e.g. Coursera, Udemy for Business, LinkedIn Learning, Pluralsight, etc.), purchasing specialized AI courses or certifications (like CompTIA's new AI Essentials (www.itpro.com)), or hiring L&D consultants/vendors to deliver training. Buying leverages existing expertise and content, and enables rapid deployment, but can lack customization to the company's unique needs.
- **Hybrid (Blend of Build and Buy):** A **mixed approach** combining internal and external elements. For example, a company may build core, proprietary modules in-house while outsourcing standard modules (e.g. basic AI literacy, compliance training) to vendors (learningelements.com.au). Often the “build”

component focuses on company-specific use cases and strategy, while the “buy” component covers generic skills or supplements internal efforts. Hybrid aims to balance flexibility and speed, but requires managing multiple sources of content.

Each approach has distinct **pros and cons** (see comparison in Table 1). In practice, companies may lean toward one approach as a baseline and then incorporate elements of the others. The remainder of this report examines each approach in depth, presenting multiple perspectives and evidence.

Building In-House AI Training Programs

Developing an internal AI training program is resource-intensive but can yield high fidelity to business needs and culture. We examine what building in-house entails, its benefits and pitfalls, and illustrative examples.

Characteristics of In-House Development

Building an AI training program internally typically involves:

- **Establishing an AI Training Team:** This team may include instructional designers, AI experts/data scientists, developers (for any custom platform), and project managers. Roles might span content creators, course developers, and AI-savvy trainers. For example, a technology firm might repurpose data scientists to co-create tutorials on their tools.
- **Defining Curriculum and Learning Paths:** The program must specify what skills to teach. Common topics include AI fundamentals (ML concepts, LLM usage), responsible AI ethics, prompt engineering, and role-based applications (e.g. marketer’s use of AI tools vs. engineer’s). Companies may develop tiered “credentials” (e.g. AI User, AI Builder, AI Leader (www.itpro.com)). A Harvard-style taxonomy of skills may power modular lessons.
- **Using or Building a Learning Platform:** Often, the same Learning Management System (LMS) or enterprise portal used for general training is extended. Some companies create dedicated portals (e.g. **Lloyds’s AI Academy platform** (www.itpro.com)). Content delivery could be through a custom-built platform or an existing LMS.
- **Content Development:** Internal SMEs produce the actual training materials: videos, interactive modules, quizzes, documentation. Generative AI tools can accelerate this (e.g. AI can draft an initial course outline or generate quizzes (www.airmeet.com)). Some organizations also “curate” third-party content, integrating publicly available tutorials into internal programs.
- **Integration and Updates:** As AI tools evolve, content must be updated. In-house teams can react quickly to new models or tools without vendor delays (www.lmsportals.com). For example, Lloyds quickly incorporated an AI-responsibility module for its entire workforce (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com).

Case Study: Lloyds Banking Group (Internal Academy with External Partners)

An illustrative example of an internally delivered academy is **Lloyds Banking Group** (UK). In January 2026, Lloyds announced an internal *AI Academy* to train all 67,000 employees (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com). The build/hybrid classification here is the author’s interpretation of the delivery arrangements; an internal platform

does not establish that all content was internally authored. Documented features include:

- **Company-wide Rollout:** Every colleague (“no matter their role or level”) will participate, starting with a mandatory brief module on “Working with AI Responsibly” (www.loydsbankinggroup.com). This ensures foundational knowledge across the board.
- **Tailored Learning Paths:** The Academy offers content for different cohorts: *AI Users, Leaders, Builders and Enablers* (www.itpro.com) (www.loydsbankinggroup.com). This role-based framing allows customizing depth – e.g. executives take strategic courses while developers get technical modules.
- **Mixed Media:** The program uses interactive eLearning, podcasts, articles, and community forums (www.itpro.com) (www.loydsbankinggroup.com). This follows best practice (microlearning + varied formats) and leverages an internal platform.
- **Partnerships for Specialized Courses:** For senior leaders, Lloyds cooperated with Cambridge Spark to create an **80-hour “Leading with AI”** course (www.loydsbankinggroup.com). This indicates Lloyds did not build *everything* internally, but partnered for higher-level leadership training.

Objectives: The bank’s executives emphasize that by investing in its people’s AI skills, operations can scale responsibly and innovate faster (www.itpro.com) (www.loydsbankinggroup.com). Notably, Lloyds set an aggressive goal: “100% of colleagues upskilled by end of 2026” (www.itpro.com). This is a target, rather than evidence of completed training.

The documented delivery arrangement combines the Group’s internal learning platform with an external leadership-training partnership. Treat curriculum ownership, staffing costs, and training’s contribution to deployment outcomes as unestablished by these announcements ([Lloyds AI Academy announcement](#)).

Advantages of Building In-House

Building allows organizations to tailor programs precisely. Key advantages include:

- **Customization and Relevance:** In-house courses can incorporate proprietary data, tools, and workflows (www.lmsportals.com). For example, a software firm can teach AI via its own codebase and data pipelines. This alignment often boosts learner engagement; when employees see that “training is closely related to their job,” learning sticks better (www.airmeet.com).
- **Cultural Alignment:** Training can reinforce the company’s values and language. The LMSPortal analysis notes that in-house content ensures messaging aligns with company culture (www.lmsportals.com). Employees may take training more seriously if it clearly ties into internal goals.
- **Control Over Content and Updates:** An internal L&D team can rapidly update materials. For instance, when a new AI regulation or tool emerges, the team can revise modules immediately (www.lmsportals.com). There’s no waiting for external publishers to refresh content.
- **Intellectual Property (IP) Ownership:** Establish ownership and reuse rights in employment terms, third-party licences, and written assignments, taking account of applicable law. UK guidance emphasizes establishing copyright ownership through a contract ([UK Intellectual Property Office](#)). Do not assume that every internally assembled or AI-generated asset is fully owned by the company.

- **Deep Engagement:** Employees involved in building or curating content can become “AI champions” internally, generating momentum. The process of involving cross-functional teams in content creation can itself be a learning exercise.

Challenges and Risks of Building

However, building also has serious challenges (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com):

- **Resource Intensiveness:** Creating a full training program “requires time, money, and expertise” (www.lmsportals.com). Companies must hire or repurpose instructional designers, graphic designers, and subject experts. According to LMSPortal, lacking these, in-house courses often result in “glorified PowerPoint” with low engagement. Typical problems include limited design skills, poor visuals, and minimal user testing (learningelements.com.au).
- **Upfront Budget:** Estimate the program from its learner population, curriculum hours, staffing, authoring tools, and platform requirements. HP frames its discussion around the cost of AI implementation ([HP framework](#)). Use a budget tailored to employee training instead of transferring its system-development estimates to the curriculum.
- **Time to Deploy:** Plan time for scripting, subject-matter review, piloting, and integration. Estimate these activities for the proposed curriculum instead of borrowing a production-AI development timeline.
- **Scalability Issues:** In-house programs may struggle to scale across large or global organizations (www.lmsportals.com). Extending specialized content to thousands of employees (possibly in multiple languages) requires ongoing effort.
- **Expertise Gaps:** Not all companies have strong L&D departments. Internal teams may lack the latest instructional design methods or technology skills. Assess learning with defined tasks and follow-up intervals; retention varies, so avoid universal passive-versus-interactive percentages ([Work-Learning Research](#)).
- **Maintenance and Refresh:** AI is a fast-moving field; content becomes stale quickly. If in-house resources are diverted elsewhere, courses may not be updated, eroding ROI.

These risks suggest that in-house build is most viable when an organization has sufficient budget and expects the content will need regular updates and tight integration with business. It favors companies viewing AI skill development as a long-term strategic capability (their “*competitive moat*” (www.hp.com)). Smaller firms or those with limited L&D staff may find pure build daunting.

Cost and Resource Considerations

Build a training-specific total cost of ownership model before comparing options. Use the same learner population, curriculum hours, outcome targets, staffing rates, delivery period, and platform assumptions for build, buy, and hybrid.

- **Initial costs:** Budget curriculum design, subject-matter review, authoring tools, platform setup, accessibility, localization, security review, and piloting.

- **Recurring costs:** Include curriculum refresh, internal support, learner time, hosting, localization updates, security, and purchased-content rights for every option. Do not assume that internal content becomes a mostly fixed cost after launch or extrapolate AI-engineer retention premiums to trainers.
- **Timing and comparison:** Model implementation delays and compare cumulative costs under the same scope. Calculate any breakeven point from the organization's assumptions rather than using a universal two-year rule.

Plume Studio's **LMS cost discussion** concerns the economics of a training company's platform. It is a vendor illustration of platform ownership versus SaaS, not a benchmark comparing equivalent corporate AI curricula. Keep any platform estimate separate from content development and learner-support costs.

In summary, building in-house offers **high customization and control**, at the price of **greater complexity, cost, and lead time** (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com). It works best where content truly needs to be bespoke or proprietary, and where an organization can commit a major investment to get it right.

Buying Third-Party AI Training Solutions

The “buy” approach means leveraging external providers for AI training. This spans vendor courses, online platforms, certifications, and partnerships.

Forms of External Training

Companies can **purchase training content or services** in several ways:

- **Online Course Marketplaces:** Platforms like **Coursera for Business, Udemy Business, LinkedIn Learning, and Pluralsight** offer course libraries that businesses can assign to employees. Coursera announced its agreement with Udemy in December 2025 and completed the combination on May 11, 2026 (**Coursera closing announcement**). A completed corporate transaction should not be taken as proof that the products have already been integrated into one service. These services cover AI fundamentals, Python for ML, and tool-specific courses.
- **Industry Certifications:** Organizations can have employees pursue certifications (e.g. AWS or Azure AI certifications, Google Cloud ML Engineer). They might reimburse these or integrate them into development plans.
- **Professional Training Firms:** Companies like Udacity, Firebrand, or general L&D consultancies provide cohort-based AI bootcamps or customized workshops. For example, Udacity's “AI for Business” nanodegree or specialized institutes (e.g. OpenAI's own training programs) could be engaged.
- **Vendor Partnerships:** Technology vendors sometimes offer training as part of enterprise deals. For instance, Microsoft has education initiatives (Project Amplify, 365 AI skilling) and AWS Train (free online labs).
- **Public/Nonprofit Initiatives:** Some large-scale programs (e.g. Cisco's pledge) are open to corporate workers, effectively free “buy” resources. Corporations can encourage staff to use these resources.

- **AI Tools Training:** Separately, vendors that sell AI tools often include training. A company buying a data science tool might also purchase a training package.

Keep overall AI investment separate from spending on employee AI training. McKinsey's January 2025 report says **92% of companies planned to increase AI investment over the next three years** (McKinsey); it does not label that spending as L&D investment. Likewise, using AI to deliver learning is a different question from training employees to use AI.

Examples of Buy-Side Initiatives

- **CompTIA (Dec 2025):** The training and certification provider launched an “*AI Essentials*” course for non-technical workers (www.itpro.com). This reflects a buy approach: a vendor providing upskilling content aimed at bridging the skill gap. CompTIA cites its own research showing only **34% of companies currently require AI skills training** (www.itpro.com), motivating their offering.
- **Cisco's AI Pledge (Sep 2025):** Cisco committed to **train one million Americans** in AI/digital skills via its *Networking Academy* (www.itpro.com). Though public, this program is effectively a third-party resource companies can tap (e.g. through hiring trained talent, or encouraging employees to sign up). It shows how large vendors are positioning themselves as education providers for AI.
- **Databricks (Oct 2025):** Databricks funded a plan to **train 100,000 people** in the UK & Ireland in data/AI skills (www.itpro.com). Their *Free Education* portal and \$10M funding illustrate an enterprise “build-buy hybrid” strategy: an AI company building its own platform but offering it to external learners, partly supplementing third-party coordination (with government and universities) (www.itpro.com) (www.itpro.com).
- **Other Corporate Programs:** Many multinationals have publicly announced AI upskilling initiatives, though the exact approach often blends build and buy. For instance, Google's *AI Works for America* (2025, with U.S. government) is a partnership to train workers in AI, largely via Google's channels (www.axios.com). Walmart announced plans for a new AI training collaboration (with OpenAI) for its workforce (apnews.com), which would use external expertise. These highlight “buy” elements: leveraging external platforms and content to train employees, rather than each firm building the course from scratch.

In all these examples, companies turn to outside expertise or platforms to *rapidly reach large audiences*. Third-party solutions are especially appealing for **standardized skills** (e.g. general AI literacy, prompt engineering, ethics) or compliance topics (e.g. data privacy) that are similar across firms (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com).

Advantages of Buying Third-Party

Key benefits of the buy approach include:

- **Speed and Convenience:** Ready-made content means organizations can **deploy training quickly** (www.lmsportals.com). There is no need to create materials from scratch, reducing lag time. For example, companies can assign an external AI course to employees within days. This is critical when

skill gaps are urgent.

- **Access to Expertise:** External vendors often employ experienced instructional designers and subject-matter experts. A third-party course may include insights from multiple clients or industries, raising overall quality. For instance, learning firm content is typically vetted and tested across different users. As LMSPortals notes, vendors have “extensive expertise” and can deliver high-quality, best-practice content (www.lmsportals.com).
- **Scalability:** Many vendor platforms are built to handle thousands of users concurrently. A SaaS LMS allows easy enrollment of large global teams. In contrast to in-house efforts that may bottleneck, buy-side solutions often “offer seamless scalability” for large or distributed workforces (www.lmsportals.com).
- **Ongoing Support and Updates:** Vendors usually maintain and update courses. For example, compliance modules are refreshed for new regulations. This means buyers need not continuously revise material themselves. Third-party providers may also supply user analytics, certifications, and customer support.
- **Lower Initial Cost:** Especially for smaller companies or limited budgets, buying sidesteps large upfront build costs. Subscription or per-seat pricing means companies pay as they go. Providers can spread development costs across many customers.
- **Focus on Core Business:** By outsourcing training creation, the organization can focus L&D resources on strategy and implementation rather than content development.

From a strategic viewpoint, buying is often the “safe” default for general skills. LMSPortals notes that for common topics (e.g. leadership, basic AI tools, compliance), third-party solutions usually suffice (www.lmsportals.com). Many corporations already have relationships with vendors (e.g. roll-out of industry certifications or popular platforms). These can be extended into AI curricula.

Challenges and Risks of Buying Third-Party

Despite these advantages, the buy path has drawbacks:

- **Limited Customization:** Off-the-shelf content is designed to be generic. It may miss nuances of a company’s products, data, or processes. LMSPortal warns that third-party courses “may not fully align” with an organization’s unique workflows (www.lmsportals.com), potentially leaving employees less prepared for company-specific scenarios. In some cases, customization is offered by vendors at extra cost, but that reduces the simplicity.
- **Loss of Control:** When outsourcing, the organization cedes control over content quality, depth, and updates (www.lmsportals.com). A vendor might change or remove content (such as dropping a module), leaving the company with outdated training. This dependence can be problematic if a vendor deprecates a product or goes out of business.
- **Dependency and Contract Risk:** Evaluate service-level requirements, content portability, renewal terms, usage limits, and migration options before purchasing. Include contract changes and vendor consolidation in scenario planning.

- **Recurring Costs at Scale:** Model subscriptions, certification fees, integration, support, and renewal terms alongside equivalent internal-program costs. Do not assume that headcount growth alone makes building cheaper.
- **User Engagement:** Without internal advocacy, external content can feel impersonal. Employees might not engage as fully if a course feels “bought in” without context. Engagement may suffer if learners see the training as generic.
- **Quality Variability:** Not all content providers are equal. The burden is on the buyer to vet the quality and pedagogy of courses. Poorly designed eLearning modules (e.g. “click-next” courses) are common and result in low retention (learningelements.com.au).

In summary, buying third-party courses is **fast and scalable**, but may not address all specific needs and incurs ongoing licensing commitments. It is well-suited to covering baseline AI literacy and general topics, especially when time-to-market is critical (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com).

Cost and Considerations for Buy

Typical cost factors for buying include:

- **Subscription/Licensing:** Obtain a quote for the expected number of active learners, course entitlements, assessment rights, and term. Keep platform licensing separate from curriculum and service costs.
- **Onboarding/Integration:** Budget for portal configuration, integration with HR and identity systems, migration, and ongoing administration. Use supplier quotes and internal staffing estimates.
- **Content Bundling:** Some providers offer enterprise bundles. The company should ensure the bundle includes relevant AI content. If not, there may be per-course purchases.
- **Support and Training:** The organization may need to train its trainers or HR team to administer the vendor platform and create learner engagement strategies.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Compare initial and recurring costs across the same planning horizon and test low-, medium-, and high-usage scenarios.

Use the same scope for each total cost of ownership model, including content refresh, internal support, learner time, hosting, localization, security, and purchased-content rights. Plume’s [platform cost illustration](#) should remain a separate LMS example, not evidence that one AI-training sourcing model always costs less.

Hybrid Strategies: Blending In-House and External Training

Recognizing the upsides and downsides of both extremes, many organizations adopt **hybrid models** that combine build and buy. A hybrid approach can take various forms, but the core idea is to use internal resources where differentiation matters, and external solutions for general needs.

What Hybrid Looks Like

A hybrid AI training program may involve:

- **Core In-House Modules:** The company builds certain modules or learning tracks internally. These might cover proprietary tools, internal data practices, company-specific AI applications, or strategic objectives. For example, a retailer might internally develop a training module on its AI inventory management system.
- **Outsourced Specialized Content:** At the same time, the company sources vendor content for standard topics. This could include courses on general AI fundamentals, instructor-led seminars from a training vendor, or ready-made eLearning on data privacy compliance. By outsourcing these parts, the company saves time and leverages external breadth.
- **Partner-Developed Programs:** Sometimes hybrid means partnering with external experts selectively. For instance, Lloyds used Cambridge Spark for its executive course (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com) (an external partnership), even as it ran its own Academy for the wider workforce.
- **Mixing Modalities:** Hybrid can also refer to blending formats. A company might host an internal “AI bootcamp” build with its HR team, but supplement it with weekly vendor webinars or access to an external MOOC. The training path is stitched together from in-house events and bought content.

A [2009 study of St George Bank](#) examines general workplace e-learning from 2000 onward. It is a historical analogy for learning design, not a 2026 AI-training sourcing comparison. Its discussion of hybrid or blended learning should not be read as verification of specific internally authored versus outsourced curriculum arrangements.

Advantages of Hybrid

A hybrid strategy can capture the advantages of both building and buying:

- **Balanced Customization:** Organizations can *prioritize* which content must be custom and which can be generic. This leverages in-house strengths while avoiding unnecessary work on standard topics. For example, a tech firm might build all content related to its bespoke AI platform internally, but buy vendor training for open-source ML tools.
- **Faster Implementation on Non-Core Topics:** By not building every course, companies can roll out parts of the program quickly. Critical modules that require speed to market (e.g. basic AI literacy for all staff) can be implemented via off-the-shelf resources.
- **Cost Efficiency in Scope:** Allocate internal development to company-specific materials and compare purchased alternatives for standard topics. Evaluate the costs of maintaining both streams under the same scope.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Internal and external content can complement each other. Feedback from vendor courses can inform future internal development. Conversely, successful internal modules might be open to outside audiences.

- **Risk Mitigation:** If one approach falters, the other can fill in. For instance, if internal content is delayed, vendor modules cover immediate needs. If a vendor is acquired or discontinues a course, the company still has internal core materials.

Challenges of Hybrid

Hybrid requires coordination and strategic oversight. Key challenges include:

- **Complex Management:** Juggling both in-house development and vendor relations can strain resources. It demands clear governance: who owns the learning roadmap, how modules interconnect, and how to ensure consistency in quality.
- **Integration and Interoperability:** If internal and external materials are delivered on different platforms, ensuring a seamless learner experience can be tricky. Learners might have to log into multiple systems. Data integration (e.g. tracking completion across systems) is a technical challenge.
- **Content Gaps or Overlaps:** A hybrid program must carefully avoid duplicating training or leaving gaps. For example, if a vendor course covers AI ethics and the company also builds one, the redundancy can waste effort; conversely, if each assumes the other covers certain basics, knowledge gaps can occur.
- **Alignment of Quality and Style:** The tone and pedagogy of internal vs. external content may differ. This can confuse learners. Ensuring a consistent “look and feel” requires oversight.
- **Budget Splitting:** Hybrid budgets need to account for dual channels. If not well planned, cost savings from vendor use could be lost in maintaining two streams of development.

These issues can be managed with clear planning. Decision frameworks (see next section) emphasize careful needs assessment to decide which elements to build or buy (www.lmsportals.com). In practice, hybrid models often phase in over time: start with a core content area to build internally, while subscribing to existing platforms for general skills.

Examples of Hybrid in Practice

Consider the following documented partnership and hypothetical program designs:

- **Lloyds Banking Group:** Lloyds’s leadership course was delivered with Cambridge Spark ([Lloyds announcement](#)). This supports an interpretation of external partnership alongside internal delivery; it does not establish the authorship of every Academy module.
- **Hypothetical Consulting Firm:** A firm could develop company-specific AI modules while purchasing external certification preparation.
- **Hypothetical Technology Company:** A company could appoint internal AI mentors while offering access to external courses.

Select the mix according to organizational needs. General build/buy advice for AI systems should be treated as an analogy, rather than empirical evidence of employee-training outcomes.

Comparing Approaches: Pros and Cons

The choice between build, buy, and hybrid hinges on multiple factors. Table 1 below summarizes the key trade-offs across dimensions commonly considered by L&D leaders. (Subsequent sections and references delve into each factor in detail.)

Factor	Build (In-House)	Buy (Third-Party)	Hybrid (Mix)
Time to Deploy	Estimate curriculum design, review, piloting, and integration.	Estimate selection, procurement, configuration, and assignment of existing courses.	Schedule purchased content and internal development separately.
Upfront Cost	Budget staff time, authoring tools, and any platform setup.	Budget licence fees, setup, and implementation support.	Budget internal development and supplier costs together.
Long-term Cost	Include refresh, support, learner time, hosting, localization, security, and purchased-content rights.	Include the same cost categories plus renewals under agreed terms.	Include the same categories for both streams; calculate any savings from scoped assumptions.
Customization	Full customization to company needs/culture/process (www.lmsportals.com).	Limited customization (generic content); additional customization may require more budget and time (www.lmsportals.com).	Partially customized: in-house covers unique needs; vendors cover generic.
Quality and Expertise	Depends on internal capabilities. Risk of limited instructional design skills (learningelements.com.au).	Likely high (vendors specialize in training design) (www.lmsportals.com) but varies by provider.	Mixture: leverage vendor quality for standard topics, plus company's unique insights.
Control & IP	Establish ownership and reuse rights under employment terms, third-party licences, assignments, and applicable law.	Establish negotiated ownership or licence rights in the contract.	Document rights for each component; build/buy labels do not determine ownership (UK Intellectual Property Office).
Curriculum Updates	Agile updates (internal team can revise anytime) (www.lmsportals.com).	Updates depend on vendor schedule; may lag behind new developments in AI tools.	Internal content updated quickly; vendor content updated by provider (reduces internal workload).
Scalability	Can be challenging to scale across global workforce (www.lmsportals.com) (language, locales).	Highly scalable (web-based delivery, multi-language support by vendors).	Scalable for generic content (bought modules); internal build scales to core topics but needs effort for broad rollout.
Engagement & Relevance	High (aligned with company goals; context-specific examples (www.airmeet.com)).	Variable (leverages best practices but may feel generic (www.lmsportals.com)).	Potentially high: core training feels relevant; external adds variety.
Dependency Risk	Assess dependencies on authoring tools, platforms, third-party materials, and internal staff.	Assess vendor viability, portability, and renewal risk.	Assess dependencies across both streams.
Ongoing Support	Internal support only (requires staffing).	Vendor provides support and updates.	Mixed: internal help for own content; vendor support for their modules.

Factor	Build (In-House)	Buy (Third-Party)	Hybrid (Mix)
Use Case Examples	Hypothetical: company-specific workflows and approved tools.	Hypothetical: general AI literacy and vendor-product skills.	Hypothetical: internal workflow practice supplemented by external courses.

Each organization will weigh these factors according to its needs. Often, short-term urgency or limited budget push for buying, while strategic differentiation or long-term cost optimization justify building. Hybrid offers a compromise by splitting the difference. The following section outlines a decision framework to guide this choice.

Decision Factors and Frameworks

Choosing the right approach requires careful assessment of context, resources, and goals. Key factors to consider include:

- **Budget and Resources:** If funds and skilled personnel are plentiful, building in-house becomes feasible (www.lmsportals.com). Conversely, with constrained budgets, buying may be the only viable option initially. An organization with deep pockets might spread the cost of internal training specialists over time by building its own training, whereas a lean startup may rely fully on purchasing courses.
- **Time Sensitivity:** How fast is training needed? When the timeline is tight (e.g. a critical AI rollout next quarter), off-the-shelf solutions or third-party workshops can be implemented quickly (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com). In contrast, if leadership can afford a longer ramp-up and wants highly tailored training, they may choose to invest time in building a program (www.lmsportals.com).
- **Content Scope & Complexity:** If the AI skills required are commonplace (e.g. using AI chatbots or basic data analysis), external courses likely exist to cover them. However, for specialized domains (proprietary ML models, internal algorithms, or industry-specific regulations), in-house development ensures the curriculum matches unique needs (www.lmsportals.com). For highly regulated industries, custom compliance training may be necessary.
- **Company Size & Structure:** Large, distributed organizations often favor scalable external programs (www.lmsportals.com). Smaller companies or those with tight-knit teams may find it easier to train in-person or with internal seminars. International firms must consider language/localization – working with global vendors might be easier than translating all content themselves.
- **Existing Infrastructure:** Companies already using a learning platform (LMS/LXP) should assess whether it can host AI training content. If an LMS is in place, building content for it (and supplementing with purchased modules) is straightforward. Otherwise, buying might entail also procuring a new platform.
- **Desired Outcomes:** If the goal is broad AI literacy across all staff, external programs can efficiently reach thousands. If the goal is developing internal AI leaders or innovators, custom “academy” style programs might align with that outcome.

- **Risk Tolerance:** Buying introduces vendor risk (e.g. what if a provider obtains new knowledge unavailable in bought content?). Building carries execution risk (e.g. lack of expertise leads to poor quality training). Hybrid can mitigate some risk by diversifying sources.

As one Gartner analysis advises, many organizations “implement the best AI strategy for [their] needs — and know that some combination of sources will likely make sense” (www.gartner.com). In practice, a stepwise approach often works best: start with a clear needs assessment, possibly pilot a small in-house program for core skills, while immediately adopting proven external content for general skills. Over time, adjust the balance based on feedback and metrics.

Illustrative Example: An organization might ask: “Do we have internal experts to create courses on our AI tools? If not, buying those makes sense. Do we need training on widely-used platforms like ChatGPT? If so, a vendor course could be fine.” This thought process is supported by experts: “if training needs are standard, buy; if highly specialized, build” (www.lmsportals.com).

Data Analysis and Market Trends

A thorough decision must also consider broader L&D and AI trends. Below we examine relevant data on market size, technology adoption, and training outcomes.

Corporate Learning Market and AI Adoption

- **Market Scale and Growth:** The corporate L&D market is large and growing. Bersin (Dec 2023) estimated it at **\$340 billion** (joshbersin.com). By early 2026 that estimate was up to **\$400+ billion** (joshbersin.com). The eLearning industry projected to reach **\$463B by 2027** (www.continu.com). Statista defines the total AI market as software, hardware, and services for developing and deploying AI applications ([Statista market definition](#)). Do not equate that broad technology market with spending on education or corporate AI-skills training. Market comparisons should identify the segment, base year, and forecast assumptions.
- **E-Learning Penetration:** Training budgets are robust, with **\$1.2k–\$1.5k spent per employee** (joshbersin.com). These figures imply companies are primed to invest in advanced training like AI, provided it aligns with ROI.
- **AI Training Adoption:** Separate adoption of AI-powered learning systems from employee training in AI skills. Use survey evidence with a stated population and date; do not infer training adoption or productivity returns from an overall technology-investment forecast.

Effectiveness and Outcomes

The following evidence concerns learning design and surveyed attitudes; it does not establish a fixed causal return from AI training:

- **Retention Rates:** Avoid universal digital-versus-classroom recall ranges. Retention varies with the learner, material, method, test, and elapsed time; evaluate a defined assessment at a stated interval ([Work-Learning Research](#)).

- **Upskilling Outcomes:** BCG's June 2025 survey associates training with more regular AI use and greater confidence (BCG). Treat this as survey evidence of association, rather than proof of a fixed causal productivity return.
- **Employee Attitudes:** Adecco's CEO reported in January 2024 that **62%** of respondents to its global workforce study expected a positive impact from AI on their jobs (WEF/Adecco). This is a dated survey finding, not a current 2026 rate.
- **Leadership Buy-In:** BCG reported in June 2025 that only about one-quarter of **frontline employees** said they received strong leadership support for AI (BCG). Include executive sponsorship and practical support in the training plan.

Future Skills Lifecycles

Plan for continuous learning, curriculum refresh, and follow-up assessment rather than a one-time course. Revisit learning paths as the organization's tools, tasks, and policies change.

Summary of Data Insights

The evidence supports treating training and leadership support as practical priorities. It does not establish universal training-adoption, retention, or ROI benchmarks. Use historical surveys as context and measure outcomes for the proposed program.

In this environment, designing an effective AI training strategy—whether built, bought, or hybrid—becomes a critical leadership task. The remainder of this report applies these trends to **real choices**, comparing scenarios and drawing lessons from corporate practice.

Case Studies and Real-World Examples

The examples below illustrate delivery and partnership arrangements; the sourcing classifications are the author's interpretation.

Lloyds Bank (Build with Hybrid Elements)

- **Approach:** See the earlier Lloyds case for its internal Academy and external Cambridge Spark partnership. Internal delivery does not establish exclusive internal authorship.
- **Documented Progress:** Lloyds reported in October 2025 that **over 110 senior leaders** had completed its bespoke 80-hour "Leading with AI" course (Lloyds announcement). This is a training participation result; it does not quantify training's contribution to AI deployments.
- **Considerations:** Use this case to discuss internal delivery with external partnership. Do not infer curriculum ownership, instructional-design hiring, or causal deployment gains from the platform description.

Walmart (Internal Delivery with an External Partner)

Walmart's September 4, 2025 **announcement** planned AI training for **U.S. frontline and office-based associates** through a collaboration with OpenAI. It specified a customized certification available through **Walmart Academy**, with a planned 2026 launch. This describes the 2025 plan; it does not establish that the rollout is complete.

The hybrid classification is the author's interpretation of external collaboration combined with Walmart Academy delivery. Assess the curriculum, shop-floor access, and learner support before drawing conclusions about development costs or outcomes.

Cisco Networking Academy (Buy/External)

- **Approach:** *Buy/Public Program*. Cisco pledged (Sep 2025) to train **1 million Americans** in AI and digital skills over 4 years (www.itpro.com). Its "Learn with Cisco" platform is an evolution of its long-running Networking Academy. This program is free and open to the public (especially youth and educators), but corporates can encourage employees to participate.
- **Scale & Context:** This is purely external, (similar to Walmart's but aimed at education/public workforce). It indicates corporate social responsibility, but it also builds a pipeline of trained potential employees. Other tech giants (Google, Amazon, Microsoft) are also investing hundreds of millions in AI training initiatives (www.itpro.com).
- **Considerations:** For corporations, such public programs serve as an external talent-developing pipeline (effectively "hiring ready" staff). While not an internal build, Cisco's commit highlights that **buying into large coalition efforts** is an option for companies wanting workforce upskilling without building a program themselves.

Databricks Free Training (Buy)

- **Approach:** *Buy/Own (Vendor)*. Databricks, a data and AI platform vendor, announced (Oct 2025) it would train **100,000 people** in UK/Ireland in AI/data via its **Databricks Free Edition** portal, backed by \$10 million funding (www.itpro.com). Although run by Databricks, this qualifies as third-party content from the perspective of a corporation: a bank or retailer could send employees to this free program.
- **Scale & Context:** The curriculum covers generative AI, data engineering, ML and analytics (www.itpro.com). Databricks partners with universities and government programs to roll it out (including a UK public training scheme). The program complements, rather than replaces, internal training.
- **Considerations:** Databricks's move exemplifies vendors expanding into education (selling not just tools, but related training). It is a multi-stakeholder "buy" resource that companies can utilize. It underscores that content vendors (like Databricks) will increasingly serve as training providers, offering self-paced courses aligned to their products. Corporations buying its platform might leverage this free training as part of an upskill strategy.

Udemy/Coursera Merger (Market Context)

The agreement announced in December 2025 was completed on **May 11, 2026** ([Coursera closing announcement](#)). The announcement's approximately **\$2.5 billion** figure was the combined company's implied equity valuation based on the December 16, 2025 share prices ([Coursera agreement announcement](#)), not the price of a training platform. Evaluate product availability and integration separately from the legal combination.

Summary of Case Insights

These examples highlight several lessons:

- **Internal Delivery and Partnerships:** Lloyds illustrates that internal delivery can coexist with external expertise. Scale alone does not establish that building is the preferred model or that all curriculum is internally authored.
- **Partnerships and Hybridization:** Interpret the documented delivery arrangements as examples to consider, rather than evidence of one sourcing model's superior outcomes.
- **Vendors as Trainers:** Platform and tech vendors (Databricks, Cisco, others) are moving into the training space, effectively offering ready-made content that companies can adopt. This pushes the boundary of "buy" to include vendor-run academies.
- **Strategic Fit:** Compare program options against the organization's learning objectives, approved tools, available staff, and procurement constraints.

Overall, the landscape is dynamic. What suits one company (e.g. build for banking) may differ for another (e.g. buy for retail). Decision-makers should weigh these real-world cases alongside their own organizational profile.

Discussion: Implications and Future Directions

The choice of AI training strategy has broad implications. We discuss organizational impacts and project future trends in corporate AI education.

Talent, Culture, and Organizational Impact

- **Warp Speed Reskilling:** As Bersin notes, AI readiness is the *#1 issue* for CHROs ([joshbersin.com](#)). Companies that excel at training will better retain and attract talent. Conversely, laggards risk losing high performers to employers who offer robust AI upskilling (the "*war for talent*" ([www.techradar.com](#))). In fact, employees expect their employer to invest in their AI skills ([www.techradar.com](#)), and lacking that can drive turnover.
- **Leadership and Change Management:** Successful training requires leadership sponsorship. BCG found that organizational support is key: employees with strong leadership backing for AI are far more optimistic and engaged ([www.bcg.com](#)). Integrating AI training into business strategy ensures it is taken seriously. Training programs should be aligned with real projects to avoid the "training in a vacuum" risk.

- **New Roles and Skills Taxonomy:** The **World Economic Forum** and Gartner highlight that AI will alter roles. Besides technical skills, complementary skills (ethics, creativity, adaptability) become important (www.airmeet.com). Companies may institute new positions (e.g. *AI learning architects*, *prompt engineering trainers*) to maintain training programs and manage AI tools.
- **Data-Driven Learning:** Future training will leverage data analytics. Knowledge graphs and skill taxonomies (using AI) will map employee skills to learning paths (www.airmeet.com). Training outcomes (time saved, productivity gains) can be measured and tied to business metrics. This raises the possibility of continuously “closing the loop” where training iterates based on performance data.
- **Ethics and Responsibility:** Training programs must include AI ethics and safety, as the Lloyds and others emphasize (www.itpro.com) (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com). Ensuring *responsible* use of AI is itself a training need. Companies often institute AI ethics courses upfront to prevent misuse and build trust.
- **Remote/Hybrid Learning:** COVID-19 shifted training online; going forward, AI training will rarely be fully in-person. Even internal programs will use digital platforms mixed with virtual labs and peer collaboration (hybrid learning). For instance, an Airmeet analysis notes that AI enables virtual co-learning at scale (www.airmeet.com) (www.airmeet.com). The hybrid training media itself (videos, simulations, live sessions) is increasingly chosen based on learning efficacy.

Future Trends in AI Training

Looking ahead to the mid/long-term, several emerging developments will shape how corporate AI training is done:

- **Generative AI-Driven Content Creation:** Generative models will continue to accelerate content generation. As Airmeet and Bersin suggest, AI will author courses, simulations, and even dialogues on the fly (www.airmeet.com). This reduces build time enormously. For the build vs buy decision, generative tools might shift the balance: even “build” may become feasible more cheaply, as AI can write initial drafts of courses that humans then refine.
- **Adaptive Personalized Learning:** The promise of AI is individualized learning. Learners will receive hyper-personalized modules tailored to their history and performance (www.airmeet.com). Build vs buy may be less of a binary if both internal and external training systems incorporate AI tutors that adapt in real-time.
- **Immersive and Experiential Training:** As virtual and augmented reality mature, **immersive simulations** will be used for critical training scenarios (www.airmeet.com). Consider safety or high-stakes training (e.g. reactor operators, pilots) using VR/AR with AI-driven scenarios. Companies may find they **build** or integrate such experiences with vendors specializing in simulations.
- **AI Tutors and Learning Assistants:** Chatbot tutors and virtual assistants (agentic AI) will provide 24/7 help to learners (www.airmeet.com). Companies may “buy” licenses to enterprise AI tutors (or use open versions). This blurs the line between training content and tool: if employees can query an AI coach at work, formal training becomes part of an ecosystem.

- **Microlearning and Workflow Integration:** The concept of training *embedded in work* will grow. AI will push micro-lessons to employees within the flow of tasks (www.airmeet.com). For strategy, this implies measuring build vs buy not just by courses delivered, but by ongoing digital experiences integrated into daily software (e.g. a CRM that suggests a one-minute lesson triggered by an action).
- **Continuous Skill Upgrading:** Instead of one-time training, companies will operate on **continuous upskilling models**. Subscription to AI tutor services (buy) or on-demand internal content updates (build) will be normal. Hybrid platforms that seamlessly serve both internal and external content libraries might emerge.
- **Regulatory and Ethical Imperatives:** With AI regulation expanding, training content will also need frequent legal updates. Buying from specialized compliance training firms may be attractive for evolving legal content, while culture-specific aspects still come from in-house.
- **Collaborative Ecosystems:** Companies may form consortiums or learning collaboratives (e.g. industry alliances) to co-create training content (a form of “hybrid” scaling). Especially for non-competitive training (like general AI readiness), shared development can lower costs. We already see some coalition examples (Cisco’s national pledges).

In summary, the lines between build and buy will blur as AI itself becomes part of the training process.

Organizations should stay flexible: what is built today might be partially automated tomorrow. The key will be balancing innovation with strategic alignment – building where true differentiation and intellectual capital lie, and buying where scalability and expertise are paramount.

Conclusion

Corporate AI training programs are at a pivotal juncture in 2026. Organizations acknowledge that AI capability is essential for future competitiveness and employee retention (www.techradar.com) (www.ibm.com). Yet they face resource constraints and strategic questions in designing training initiatives. Our analysis highlights that **no one-size-fits-all answer exists** to the build vs. buy dilemma.

Build strategies yield tailor-made training closely aligned with business needs (www.lmsportals.com) (www.airmeet.com), but require heavy investment and time. **Buy** strategies leverage external expertise for speed and scale (www.lmsportals.com), though at the cost of customization and long-term licensing fees. **Hybrid** models promise a balance (learningelements.com.au) (www.lmsportals.com), but demand disciplined management of multiple content sources.

The optimal choice depends on factors like urgency, budget, company culture, and the uniqueness of the skills required (www.lmsportals.com) (www.lmsportals.com). Companies should analyze their own context using decision frameworks and possibly pilot small programs. Crucially, successful AI upskilling also requires leadership commitment, change management, and integration with real business projects (www.bcg.com) (www.lloydsbankinggroup.com).

Do not infer a universal training ROI from these surveys or illustrative cases. Define the intended skills, measure job-relevant performance before and after the program, track ongoing costs, and assess outcomes against a suitable comparison where feasible. BCG’s 2024 analysis notes that the approach yielding the

greatest benefits remains unsettled (BCG).

Looking forward, corporate AI training will become increasingly **AI-driven**. Generative AI, immersive simulations, and intelligent tutoring will reshape how we design and deliver training (www.airmeet.com) (www.airmeet.com). We anticipate that future programs will merge human expertise with AI tools — for example, an AI engine crafting personalized modules, refined by in-house experts.

In conclusion, whether building, buying, or blending, corporations must thoughtfully align their AI training approach with strategy. The decision is not merely pedagogical but transformational, impacting talent, productivity, and innovation. By leveraging the insights and evidence presented here — and continuously monitoring evolving trends — organizations can build training programs that truly equip their workforces for an AI-driven future.

Source links

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