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CASE STUDY:

THE FUTURE TALENT PIPELINE

A Quarterly Publication on AI's Role in Talent Management

2026 | SPECIAL REPORT

THE STATE OF GENERATIVE AI IN TALENT MANAGEMENT FOR HOTEL SALES, MARKETING AND REVENUE MANAGEMENT

This report is presented with the support of the HSMAI Foundation's 2026 Corporate Talent Partners

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Bridging the AI Literacy Gap From Classroom to Commercial Team

The next disruption in hotel talent is not a labor shortage. It is a literacy mismatch. The incoming workforce is already using AI regularly, building habits and expectations long before they walk into a revenue meeting, a marketing standup, or a sales pipeline review.

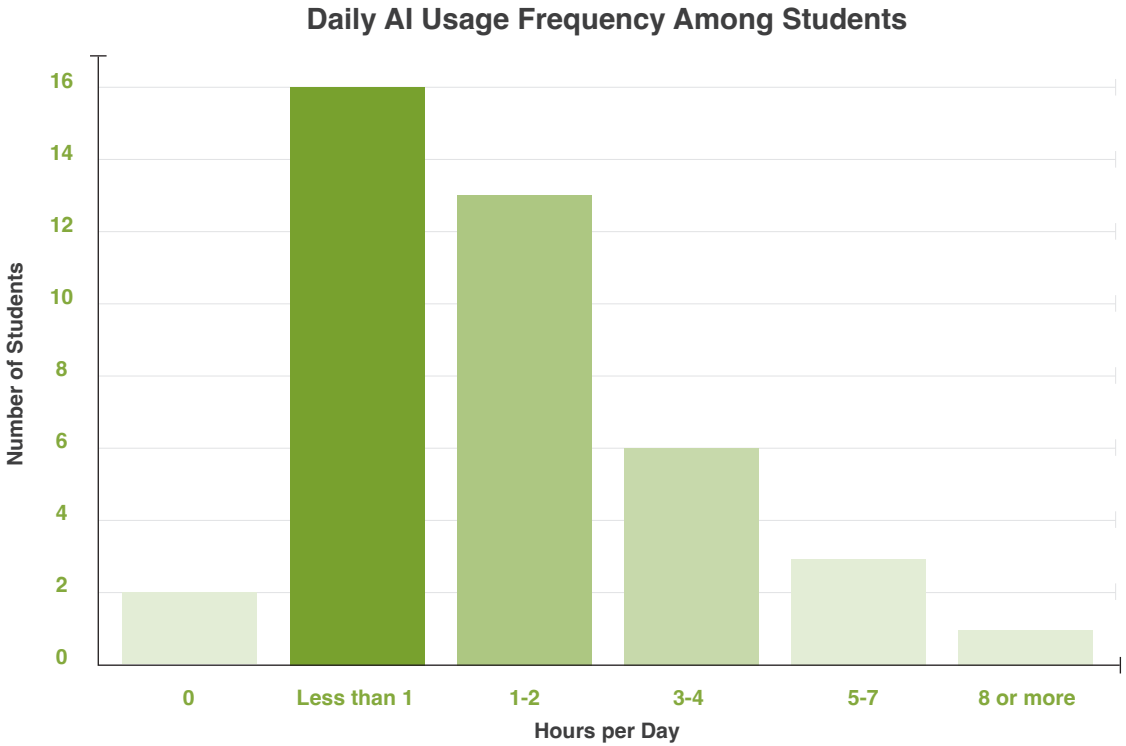
Context: The Third Study in a 2025-2026 Talent Research Series

This case study is the third piece in the HSMAI Foundation talent management research arc, building on the foundational 2024 work on *The State of Generative AI in Talent Management*. The first case study examined recruitment and how AI is entering hiring workflows. The second case study explored professional development and how AI is reshaping learning, coaching, and performance enablement. This third case study shifts upstream to the future talent pipeline by analyzing how hospitality students report using AI today, how prepared they feel, and what they expect from employers when they enter the workforce.

Student AI Use: Habitual, Not Extreme

Students report regular AI usage, with most clustering in the light-to-moderate daily range rather than all-day dependence. That distribution matters because it suggests the typical student is building a consistent habit, not necessarily deep expertise.

Tool usage is heavily concentrated in general-purpose chat tools, with ChatGPT and similar interfaces dominating mentions. This concentration matters because it shapes a default mental model where AI equals a conversational writing and research assistant.



The Confidence-Preparedness Paradox

Students rate their confidence in applying AI to work tasks at 3.24 out of 5, while rating their program's preparation at 2.78 out of 5. That +0.46 gap matters because it implies students are self-teaching AI through experimentation more than through structured curriculum.

This pattern creates a predictable workforce risk: students arrive with strong comfort using AI, but without consistent professional scaffolding around validation, confidentiality, and decision accountability. That risk matters because commercial work punishes overconfidence faster than academic work does.

What Graduation Year Tells Us and What It Does Not

Students at different points in their degree path are using AI for different reasons, and that shapes everything in this case study. Early in college, AI tends to function as a convenience tool for foundational coursework, quick research, and drafting. Closer to graduation, the work gets heavier and more applied, capstones, multi-source research, and longer projects, and AI starts behaving more like a workflow partner for synthesis and problem framing. In the data, confidence generally rises as students approach graduation, but the relationship is uneven, with a notable confidence–preparedness disconnect in the mid-pipeline that suggests self-taught comfort is outpacing structured training. That dynamic matters because it explains the central tension: students are arriving with habits and confidence, yet still need employers to translate "I use AI" into "I can use AI responsibly and effectively in a commercial hotel environment."

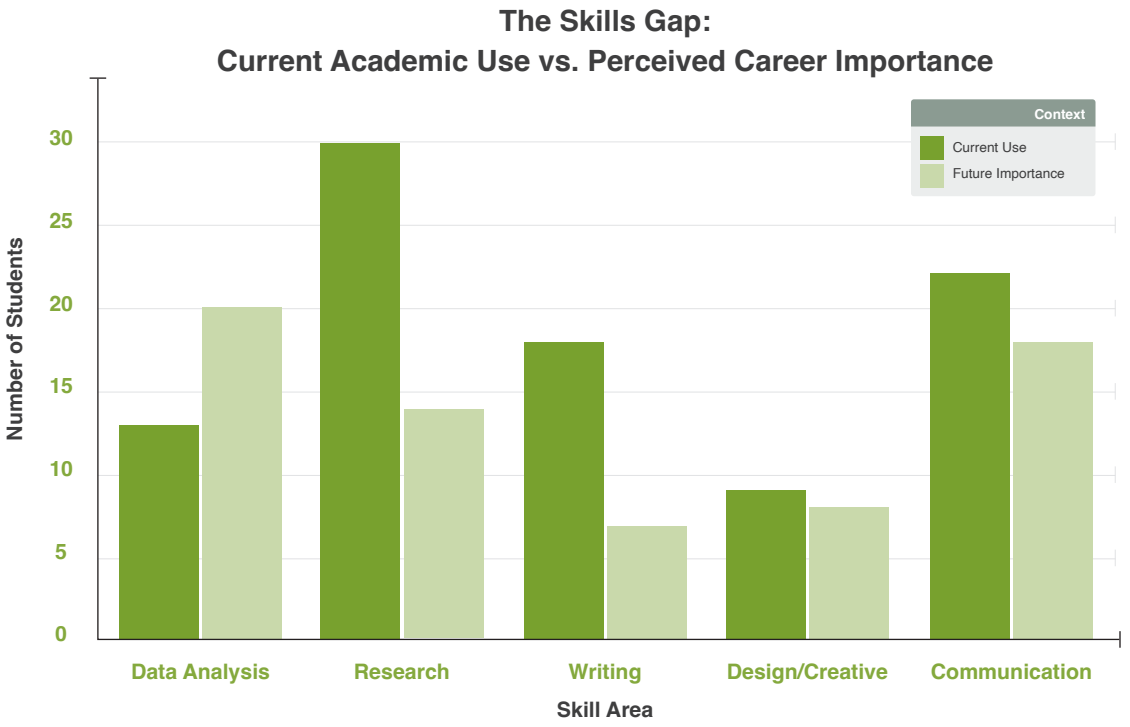
Trends by Graduation Year					
Grad Year		Avg Hours	Day Avg	Confidence Ave	Preparedness Gap
2025	2	4.25	4.00	4.00	0.00
2026	7	2.58	3.29	2.86	+0.43
2027	7	1.57	3.29	2.43	+0.86
2028	9	1.50	3.33	3.11	+0.22
2028	16	1.42	3.07	2.57	+0.50

Pattern: Students closer to graduation use more AI and have smaller confidence-preparedness gaps. The Class of 2027 shows the largest gap (+0.86), suggesting this cohort may be in a critical transition period where intervention would be valuable.

The Skills Gap: What Students Practice vs. What They Expect to Matter

Students rank data analysis as highly important for their future careers, yet their current usage skews toward research and writing. That mismatch matters because it suggests students understand what hospitality rewards, but their day-to-day AI practice is still shaped by academic workflow needs.

In the survey, prompt engineering barely registers as a priority in the student mindset. That matters because prompting is the practical control layer for output quality, repeatability, and risk, and undervaluing it leads to inconsistent results in real business settings.



The Recruitment Expectation-Usage Disconnect

Many students expect AI to be embedded into recruiting processes, including scheduling interviews and screening candidates, yet only 16% report using AI to support their own job search. That disconnect matters because students see AI as an institutional capability that will be used on them, not as a professional advantage they actively wield.

This shifts what recruitment should measure. That shift matters because the winning candidates will not be the ones with the most tool familiarity, but the ones who can demonstrate learning agility, validation discipline, and sound judgment using AI in ambiguous situations.

A Shared Limitation: The "Content Generator" Mental Model

Students default to AI as a writing and research assistant, and industry adoption similarly clusters around lower-risk tasks such as drafting job descriptions (78.6%) and resume screening (28.6%). This parallel matters because it shows both the talent pipeline and many organizations are building AI habits in the same narrow lane.

The commercial implication is straightforward: if Day 1 onboarding does not reset the mental model, new hires will carry "school-style AI use" into revenue, marketing, and sales workflows where it is insufficient. That matters because commercial performance requires not just speed, but traceability, validation, and decision-ready outputs.

Strategic Guidance: Turning AI Comfort Into Operational Readiness

Recruitment: Make governance visible and concrete. This matters because candidates are entering a world where AI policy is part of trust, and clarity signals maturity.
Professional development: Break the "ChatGPT default" on Day 1 by shifting from generative writing to operational analytics and decision support. This matters because early exposure sets the operating system for how employees will use AI under pressure. Introduce the categories of hospitality AI they will encounter, such as revenue forecasting and pricing support, guest messaging automation, sentiment analysis from reviews, and performance reporting automation. This matters because it helps graduates connect AI to hotel outcomes rather than treating it as a general writing assistant.

Retention: Assign AI to repetitive work like scheduling and basic data entry, then explicitly reinvesting saved time into guest connection and strategy. This matters because employees will only trust AI-driven efficiency if it clearly protects meaningful work.

Trust and monitoring: Be transparent about where AI is used in performance oversight, since 35% of students expect AI monitoring in the workplace. This matters because ambiguity in monitoring creates suspicion, while clarity creates stability.

Conclusion

This study's message is not that students are unprepared. It is that their preparation is informal, uneven, and often optimized for school rather than hotel operations. The organizations that win the next decade will not treat AI literacy as a perk, a policy memo, or a one-time training. They will treat it as an onboarding system that converts student confidence into professional judgment, and converts everyday AI use into commercial advantage without sacrificing the human core of hospitality.

About the Foundation

The Foundation's mission is to cultivate people. We invest in a skilled and diverse commercial workforce for global hospitality to strengthen performance and ensure a thriving, competitive, and future-ready industry. The work of the Foundation is supported by private donations and corporate talent partners. The HSMAI Foundation is a 501(c)3 organization established in 1983 to serve as the research and educational arm of the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International. Visit hsmaifoundation.org for more information.

About the Author

Michael J. Goldrich is the founder and chief advisor of Vivander Advisors, specializing in generative AI education and digital transformation strategies. With over 20 years of experience in hospitality and technology, he currently serves as Chief Experience Officer at The Hotels Network, leveraging AI and predictive analytics to enhance guest engagement and conversions. As co-leader of GAIN's AI Hospitality practice, he drives revenue growth and cost savings through AI integration. Goldrich also serves on the HSMAI Foundation Board. A recognized industry leader, Goldrich was named one of HSMAI's Top 25 Extraordinary Minds in 2020 in Sales, Marketing, and Revenue Optimization and has received multiple Adrian Awards for innovative campaigns. He is the creator of an AI Literacy Program that helps hospitality professionals integrate AI into workflows and frequently speaks on AI and digital transformation. Goldrich holds degrees from the University of Michigan and Northwestern University and has refined digital strategies for Accenture, Starwood, and Wyndham, shaping the future of AI in hospitality.