FOR BUSINESS · GUIDE

Upskill vs hire

The build-or-buy comparison for closing a technical skills gap

The gap on your roadmap will get costed by somebody this year. This guide is for the person who owns that decision and has to defend it upstairs: what hiring really costs, what upskilling really returns, when each one wins, and the four questions that settle it. It's honest on both sides, because some roles you'll always hire for.

$14,170 vs $5,770

average cost of one external IT hire vs upskilling an existing employee (Pluralsight Tech Skills Report)

89%

of organisations now say hiring costs more than upskilling for IT roles, up from 49% a year earlier

48%

of candidates accepted their most recent job offer, down from 85% two years earlier (Gartner, 4Q25)

PART 1

The numbers side by side

Start where your CFO will: the money. The advertised salary is the smallest part of what hiring costs, and the course fee is the smallest part of what upskilling gives back.

What you're weighing	Hiring a specialist	Upskilling someone you employ
Up-front cost	Agency fees plus a market-rate salary premium	Programme and certification fee per learner
Time to capability	Months of advertising, interviews, offers and notice periods	Pathway runs alongside the day job; first certifications land in weeks
Where the capability goes	Walks out the door if the hire resigns	Stays in the team and compounds
Effect on pay bands	An above-band offer resets expectations across the team	Develops people within existing bands
Main risk	Declined offers, counter-offers, early attrition	Learner drop-off, manageable with structured pathways and manager support
What your boss sees	An open requisition and an agency invoice	A live programme with benchmarked progress

PART 2

Where hiring's real bill hides

Recruitment fees

A percentage of first-year salary, due when the candidate starts rather than when they prove out.

The empty months

Cloud and security roles routinely sit open a quarter or more; the work lands on the team you already have.

The offer that doesn't land

With less than half of offers accepted, a flawless process can still put you back at the longlist in week twelve.

The pay-band problem

An above-band offer resets expectations. The team finds out; retention risk spreads where you can least afford it.

Ramp and attrition

Even an excellent hire spends months learning your stack. Resign inside year one and you pay the bill twice.

PART 3

What upskilling gives back

Capability that stays

Someone you develop holds the skill inside your team, at existing pay bands, and lifts the people around them.

Proof you can show upstairs

CompTIA Security+, AWS Certified Solutions Architect, ITIL® 5 Foundation: external, dated evidence the capability is real.

Retention you'd otherwise pay for

Learning opportunities rank as the number one retention strategy (LinkedIn); 94% of employees say they'd stay longer at a company that invests in their development.

Speed

A structured pathway can put a first certification in the team while a specialist requisition is still at second interviews.

> The honest risk on this side is drop-off. The fix is unglamorous: map the pathway to a named gap, put milestones with exam dates in the diary, and defend study time the way you'd defend delivery time.

PART 4

When hiring is still the right call

Nobody has the foundation

If no one has anything to build from, someone has to bring the discipline in: usually a senior person who can lead and mentor.

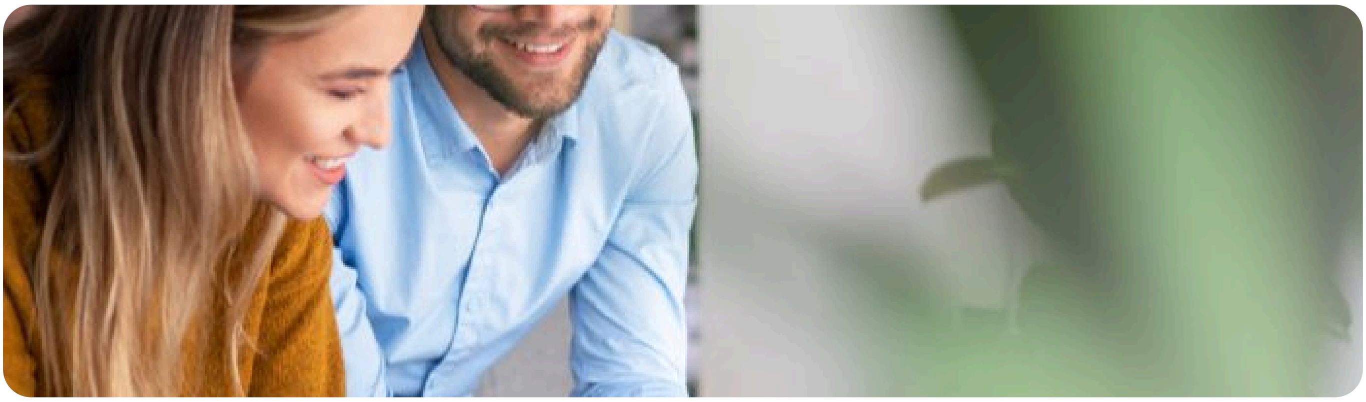
You need it on day one

A contract commitment, a cutover or a fixed regulatory date won't wait for a learning cycle. Buy the capability, then build behind it.

The role is the ceiling

A security lead or principal architect exists partly so the team has someone to grow towards. Worth the premium.

> **The strongest pattern is deliberate:** hire the scarce lead, then upskill the team around them so the capability spreads rather than sitting in one salary.



PART 5

The four-question decision

When the debate starts circling, ask these in order. Most mid-market gaps in cloud, cyber, data and delivery come out the same way: hire the rare lead where you genuinely must, and upskill everyone else.

1

Is there a foundation to build on?

Someone one or two certifications away? Upskilling is live. Nobody? Price a hire or contractor for the lead role first.

2

When is the real deadline?

Day one points to hiring. A quarter of runway points to upskilling, and most roadmaps have more runway than the panic suggests.

3

Will you need it again?

A recurring need favours upskilling: retained capability compounds. A genuine one-off can favour a contractor.

4

What does each path cost in full?

Fees, premium, empty months and attrition on one side; programme, certification and study time on the other.

PART 6

Put your own numbers on it

Line	Hiring	Upskilling
Up-front cost	[agency fee + salary premium]	[programme cost per learner × N]
Months before the capability is working	[advertise + interview + notice + ramp]	[pathway timeline from the benchmark]
Cost of the gap in the meantime	[£]	[£]
Risk cost (offer declined / learner drop-off)	[£]	[£]
Full cost to a working capability	[£]	[£]

Benchmark the gap before you choose how to close it.

Book a free skills-gap consultation

learningpeople.com/business

Prepared by Learning People · Taking the paper upstairs? Our internal business-case template puts these numbers in the format a Finance Director expects (same resources library).
Sources: Pluralsight Tech Skills Report; Gartner 4Q25 candidate research; LinkedIn Talent Report and Workplace Learning Report.