UPGRAD NEXT · RESEARCH REPORT · 2026

What **Gen Z** Really Wants From Work

A study of 11,800 young Indians
on careers, employment, learning, AI and entrepreneurship

18–30-year-olds across 16 cities representing metro, urban and rural India

August–September 2026







ABOUT THE STUDY

Who we spoke to

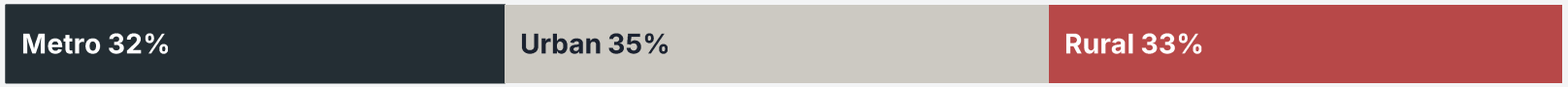
upGrad Next surveyed young Indians who are studying, looking for work or working. Among those at work, the data also covers full-time, part-time and contractual or gig employment models.

11,800
respondents aged 18–30

16
cities across metro, urban and rural India

26
questions on work, learning, AI and enterprise

PLACE OF UPBRINGING



CURRENT STATUS



GENDER



HIGHEST QUALIFICATION



Cities: Bangalore, Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Cochin, Coimbatore, Delhi, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kanpur, Kolkata, Lucknow, Ludhiana, Mumbai, Nagpur, Patna, Pune.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This generation has stopped expecting employers to provide security, so it is building its own safety net



01.

The beanbag is nice, but the desk and the pay cheque matter more

51% prefer a **fully in-office arrangement** and 81% would happily accept **a well-paid role even if the work is not interesting**. Culture, purpose and flexibility sit at the bottom of their list.



02.

Very little surprise in what attracts or distracts them

90% expect **a significant promotion within three years** and 54% **don't see themselves in their current job beyond two**. Limited growth and poor leadership, more than pay, push them out.



03.

The most scared of AI are the ones refusing to learn it

Learning is an insurance policy: **job security is the top reason to upskill**. Yet fear is driving this generation, and only 11% have **built anything on AI platforms.**



04.

Education was great, but not enough

91% call their education effective, yet 99% still have gaps to close. The gap lies in application, and **communication is the skill they most want to improve.**



05.

The risk takers don't come from the metros

46% of the **rural-raised are extremely willing to join an early-stage startup**, against 26% in metros. **Mentorship**, more than funding or government support, would help them take the leap.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800)

BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES

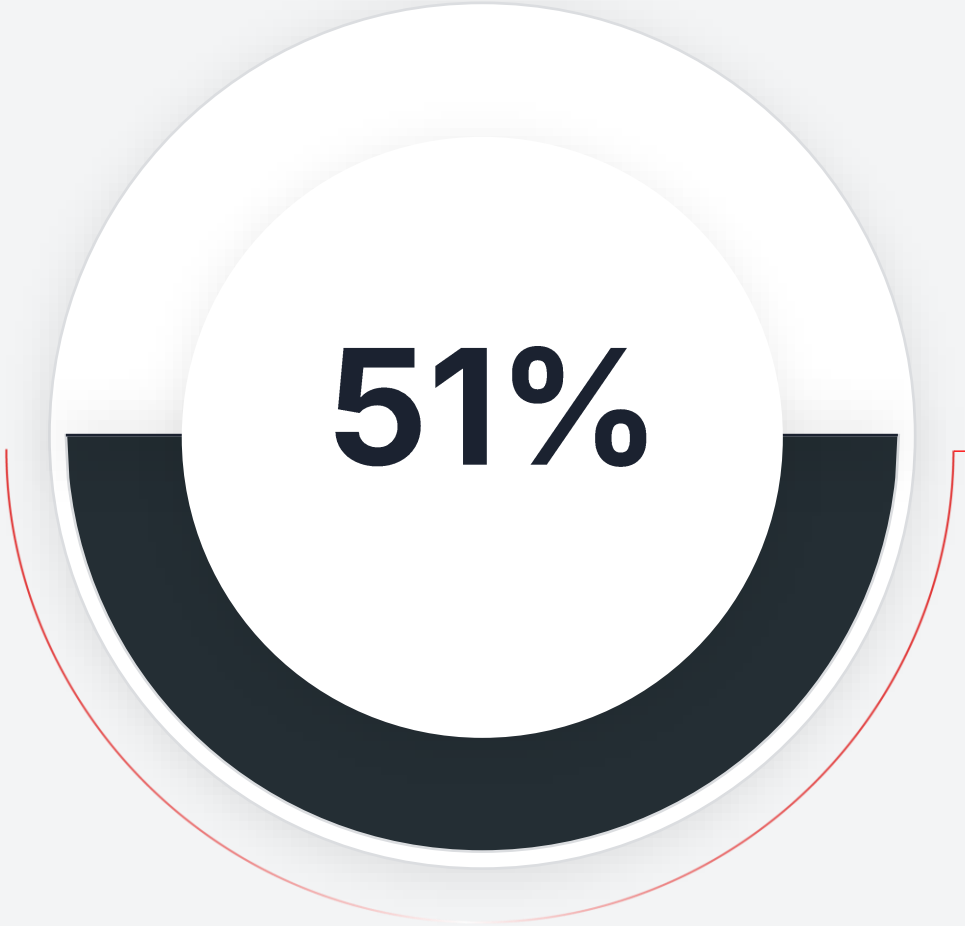
Gen Z is seen as a demographic with uniform beliefs. The data says otherwise

The popular belief	What our study shows	What it means for organizations
Gen Z prefers remote work	51% prefer fully in-office; only 13% want fully remote	The office is where they expect to learn, be seen and grow
They are driven by purpose more than pay	35% rank social impact in their bottom two; 81% would take a dull, well-paid role	Rewards and growth, not mission statements, win talent
Culture decides where they work	Company culture ranks last of ten factors, in the bottom two for 45%	Culture matters once they join; it rarely decides the offer
Online learning suits them best	Online courses are the least preferred way to learn (15% rank first)	Learning built on content libraries misses the mark
Metro youth are the most ambitious	Rural-raised are far more willing to join startups (46% vs 26%)	Talent for growth roles sits well beyond the big cities

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q1, Q3, Q7, Q13, Q24

01.

THE BEANBAG IS NICE, BUT THE DESK AND THE PAY CHEQUE ARE MORE IMPORTANT



Prefer a fully in-office arrangement, regardless of location or career level

Only 13% want to be fully remote, and this drops to **just 6%** of those raised in the metros.

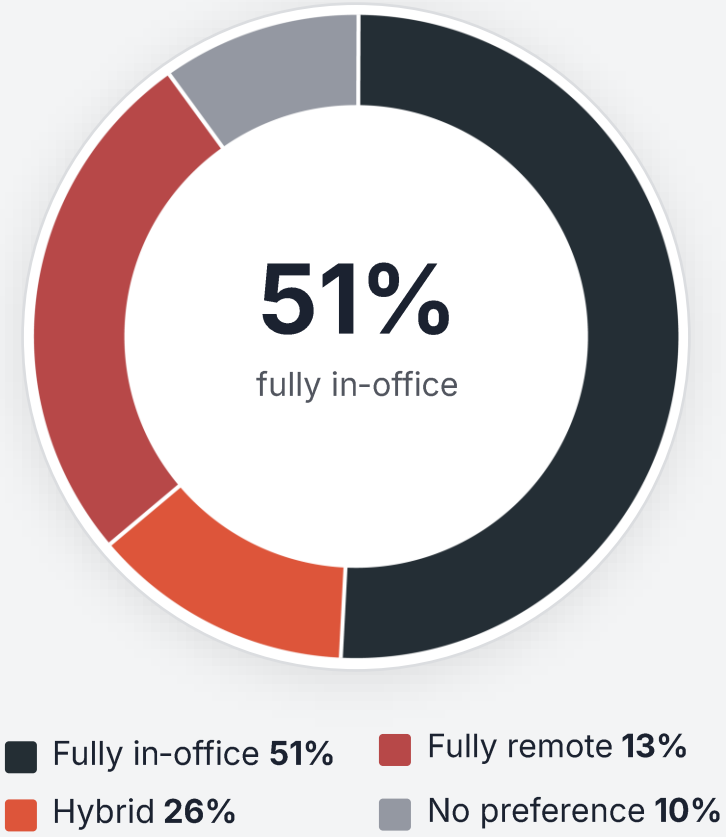
For young people early in their careers, the office is where they learn, get noticed and build the relationships that lead to the next role.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q3

01.

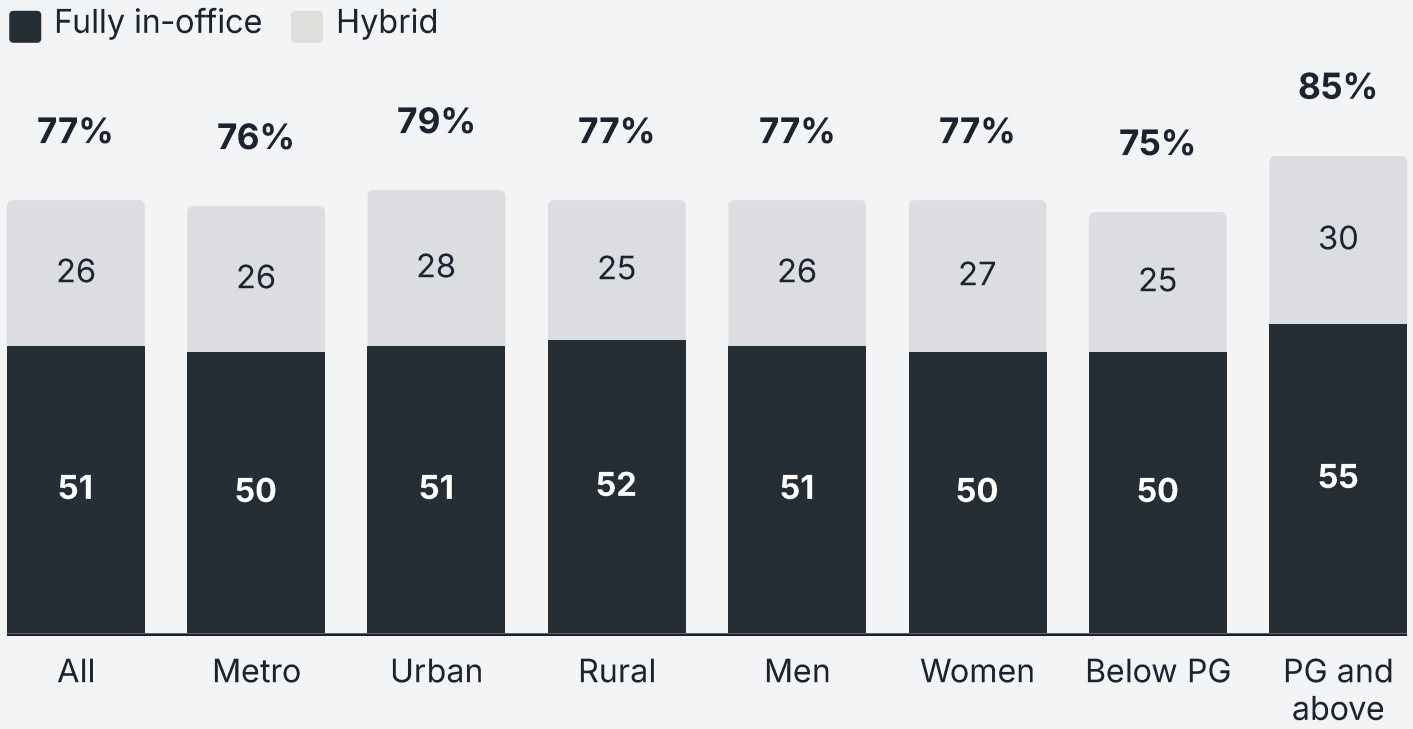
THE BEANBAG IS NICE, BUT THE DESK AND THE PAY CHEQUE ARE MORE IMPORTANT

Half of young Indians want to be **in the office full-time**, whoever they are



Fully in-office **51%**
Fully remote **13%**
Hybrid **26%**
No preference **10%**

Share who want to be in the office full-time or part of the week



The preference holds regardless of where they grew up, their gender or their education, ranging only from 50% to 55%.

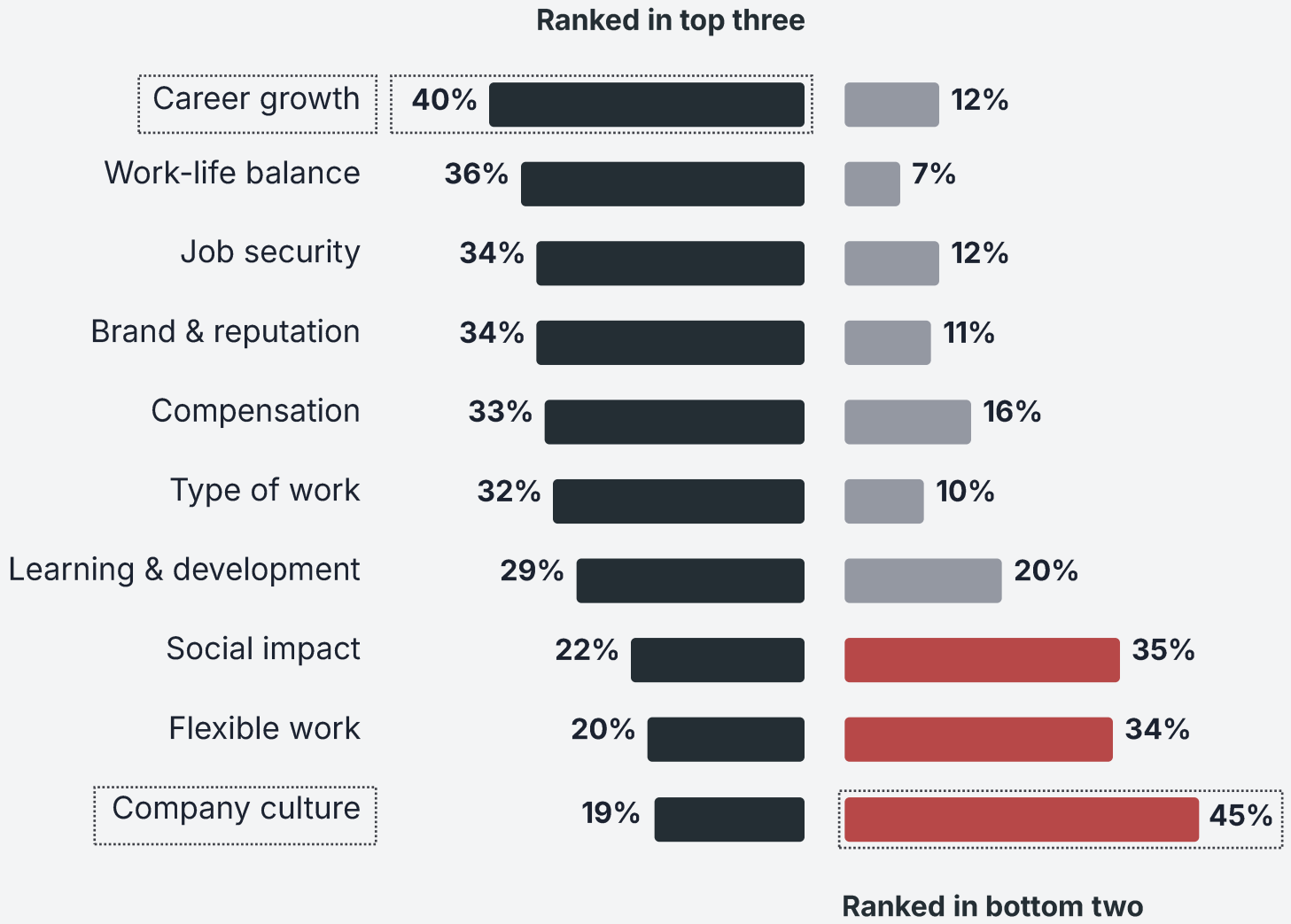
Add hybrid, and 77% want to be in the office at least part of the week; only 13% want to work fully remote.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q3

01.

THE BEANBAG IS NICE, BUT THE DESK AND THE PAY CHEQUE ARE MORE IMPORTANT

Purpose, Culture & Flexibility is **not the norm** to attract Gen Z



WHAT IT TELLS US

Rated on its own, every factor matters to **83–88% of respondents.**

In ranking ten job factors, career growth comes out on top (40% place it in their top three).

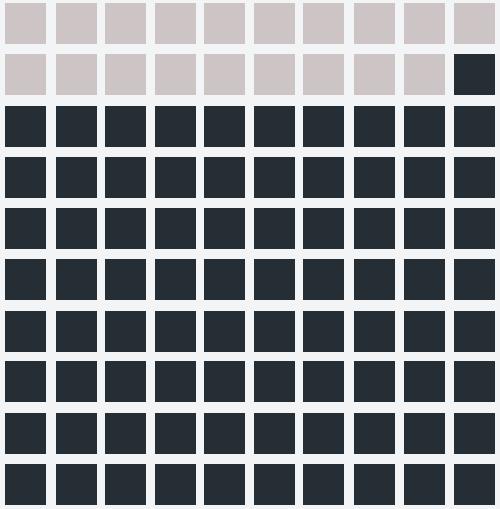
45% put company culture in their last two places, followed by social impact **(35%)** and flexible work **(34%)**: the tenets most organizations have traditionally focused on.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q1 ranking of ten factors; Q2 independent ratings

01.

THE BEANBAG IS NICE, BUT THE DESK AND THE PAY CHEQUE ARE MORE IMPORTANT

Compensation buys a lot of tolerance



81

in every 100 would **accept a role that pays well above market**, even if the work is not interesting

Only 8% would turn down such a job.

Likely to accept, by group:



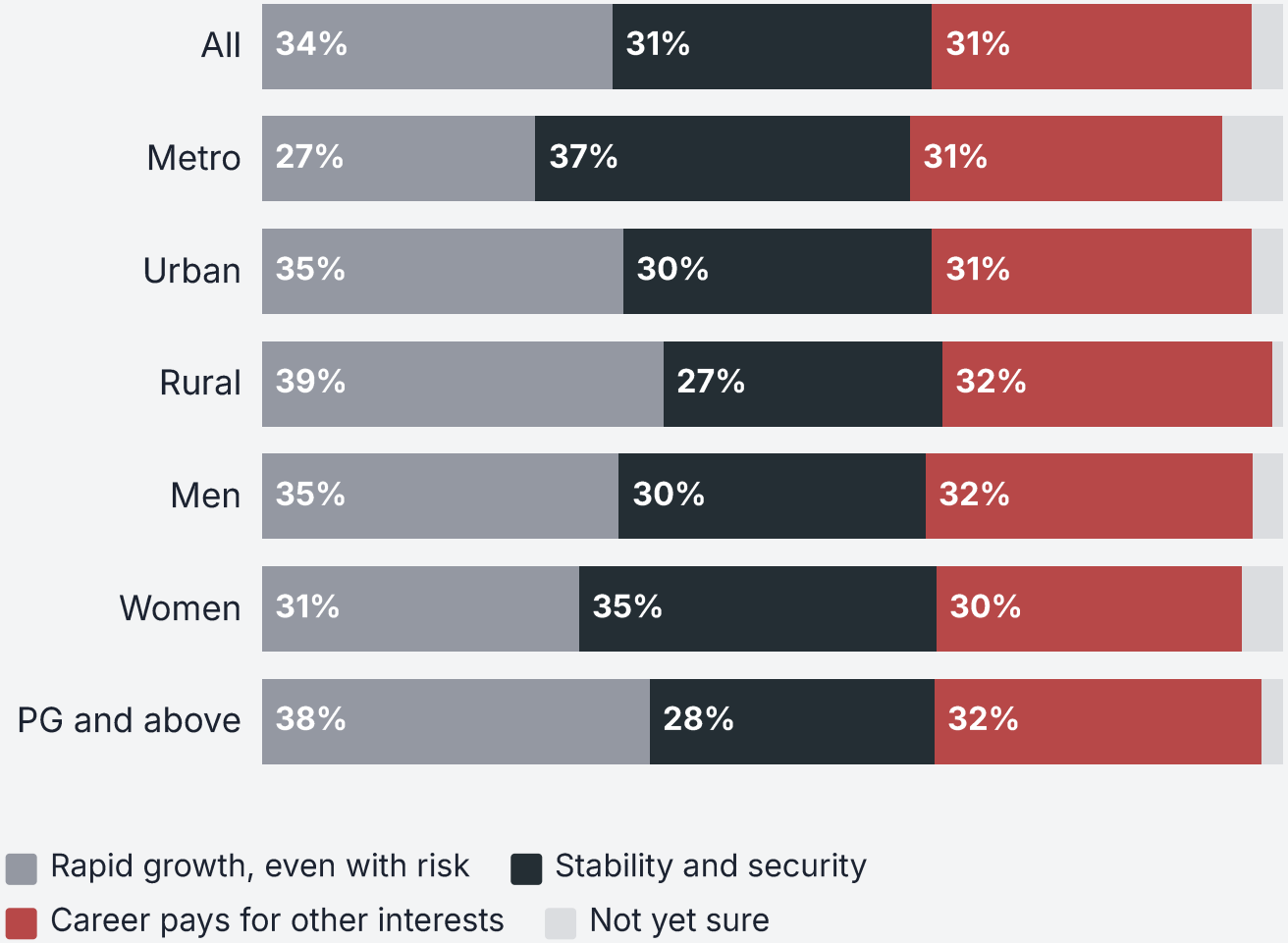
- The rural- and urban-raised are the most pragmatic (87–88%);
- The metro-raised (66%) and
- Women (73%) are the most likely to hold out for work that interests them.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q7

01.

THE BEANBAG IS NICE, BUT THE DESK AND THE PAY CHEQUE ARE MORE IMPORTANT

Nearly one in three young Indians does **not expect work to be their identity**



WHAT IT TELLS US

Their career outlook splits three ways:

34% chase rapid growth even with risk;
31% want stability;
31% see a career simply as something that pays for their other interests.

That last group is the quiet surprise, and it holds steady across every group. The job is a platform and need not be a calling.

Therein lies a message for organizations: don't necessarily try to blend the two.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q5

02.

VERY LITTLE SURPRISE IN WHAT ATTRACTS OR DISTRACTS THEM

A restlessness to keep **enhancing the resume**

Individuals may be willing to move for smaller pay raises, but that is not what fundamentally pushes them out. The drivers of job change for this generation do not seem very different from those of previous generations.



90%

expect their **first significant promotion** in not more than three years



54%

don't see themselves in their **current job** for more than two years



33%

would consider **moving jobs for a raise** of just 10% or less

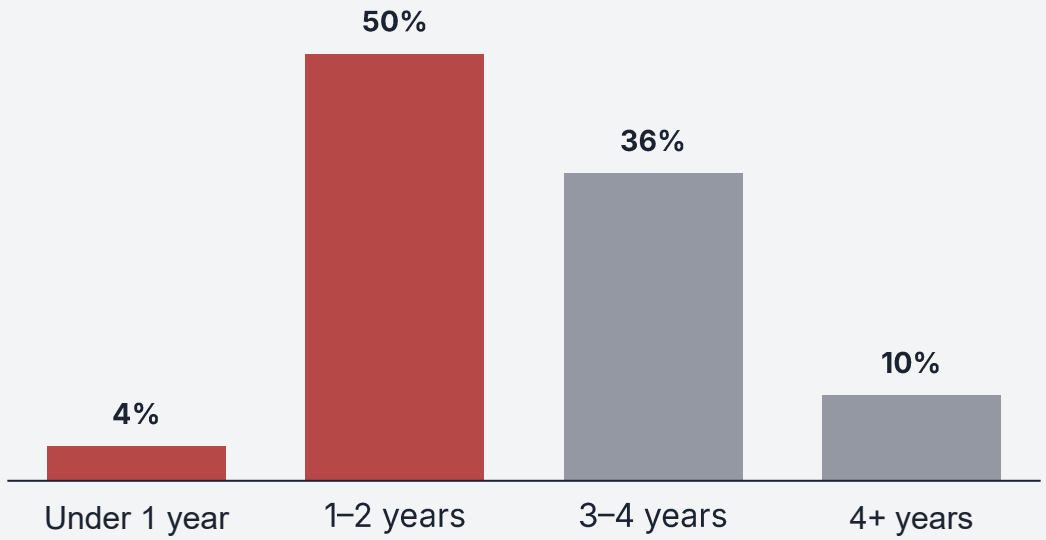
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q20, Q21, Q22

02.

VERY LITTLE SURPRISE IN WHAT ATTRACTS OR DISTRACTS THEM

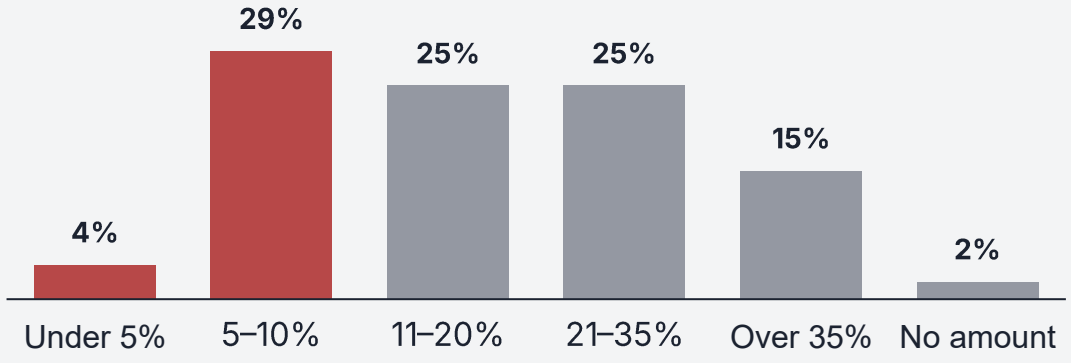
Most don't see themselves in their **current job beyond two years**

Expected stay at first or current job



As little as **10%** expect to stay four years or more.

Minimum raise that would make them consider leaving



Only **2%** say no amount would make them leave. Most of the **29%** who would switch for a 5-10% raise are students.

A little more than a third of the urban-raised (**36%**) would move for a raise of 10% or less, against **29%** of the metro-raised; yet metro youth set the highest price for moving, with **19%** needing more than 35%.

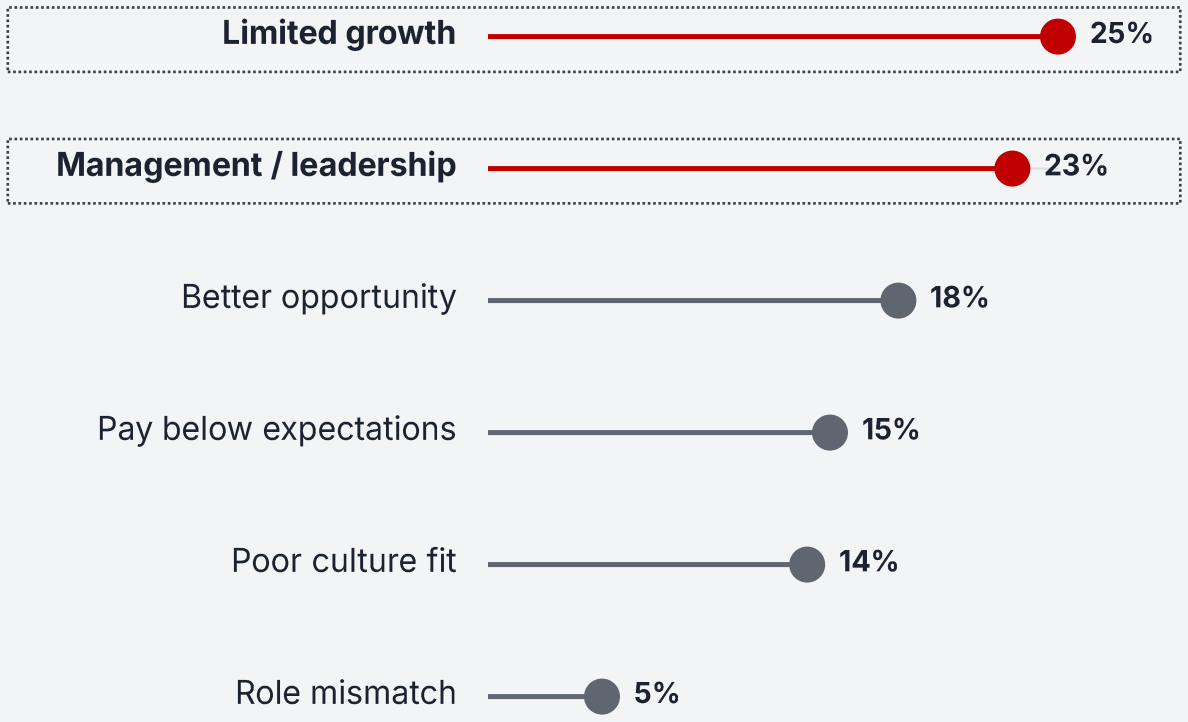
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q21, Q22

02.

VERY LITTLE SURPRISE IN WHAT ATTRACTS OR DISTRACTS THEM

Growth and managers, not pay, fundamentally **push people out**

Most likely reason to leave a job within the first year



WHAT IT TELLS US

The likeliest reasons to quit remain limited growth (**25%**) and management or leadership issues (**23%**), ahead of a better offer elsewhere (**18%**) and low pay (**15%**).

These drivers are no different from previous generations; what has changed is how quickly this generation acts on them.

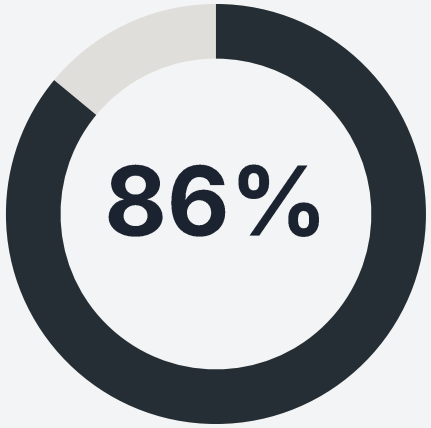
Women are a little more likely to cite pay (**17%**) or a better offer (**20%**); postgraduates cite poor culture fit more (**17% vs 13%**).

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q6

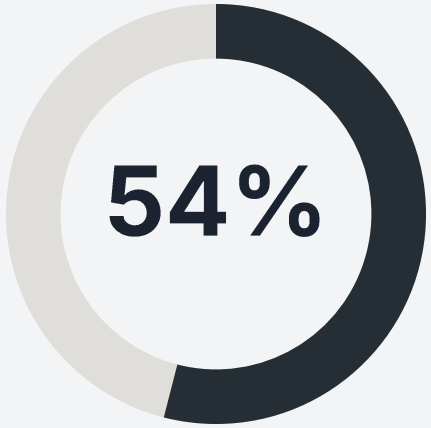
02.

VERY LITTLE SURPRISE IN WHAT ATTRACTS OR DISTRACTS THEM

A need for **job security**, alongside a desire to keep exploring



rate **job security** as important, and half as extremely important

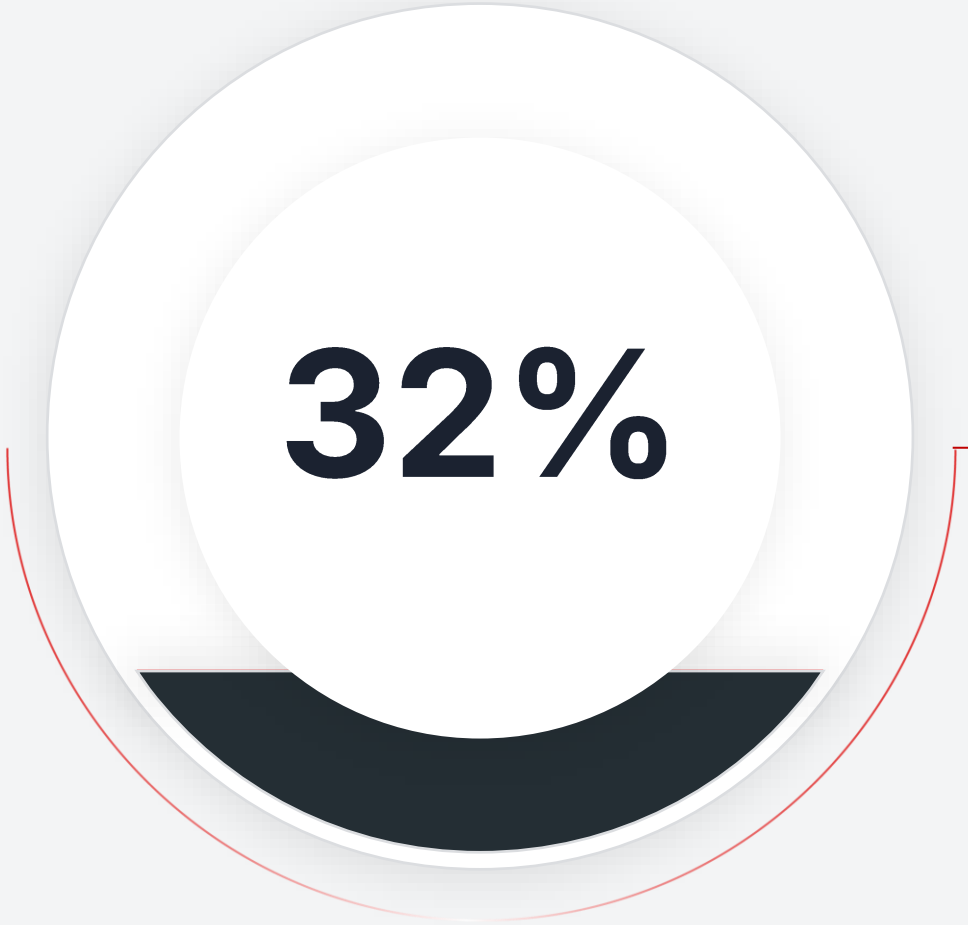


expect to move on from their **current job** within two years

With constant news of job losses around them, it is no surprise that half rate job security as extremely important.

The paradox points to a restlessness to keep enhancing the resume: security now comes from a stronger CV rather than a longer tenure. Organizations need to factor this in as one of the core tenets when building their employer brands.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q2, Q21



See job security as the core driver for **Upskilling**

Followed by the ability to switch roles or industries (**22%**). Promotion (**18%**), pay (**15%**) and mastering a subject (**11%**) trail.

Learning is clearly seen as an insurance policy.

There is palpable fear here, and that fear is shaping how this generation approaches AI.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q12, rank 1

03.

THE YOUNG INDIANS MOST SCARED OF AI ARE THE ONES REFUSING TO LEARN IT

Learning is clearly seen as an insurance policy

Outcome most wanted from upskilling (rank 1)

	All	Metro	Urban	Rural
Improved job security	32%	32%	32%	33%
Switch roles / industries	22%	19%	21%	25%
Promotion	18%	20%	16%	18%
Higher pay	15%	10%	19%	15%
Mastery / interest	11%	16%	10%	8%
Mandatory requirement	3%	5%	2%	1%



WHAT IT TELLS US

Job security is the top motive in every group (**32–33%**), and switching roles comes second (**22%**). Both are about keeping options open.

The metro-raised are more likely to learn for mastery (**16%**) and least likely for pay (**10%**).

The rural-raised lean towards switching roles (**25%**); postgraduates are the most pay-driven (**20%**).

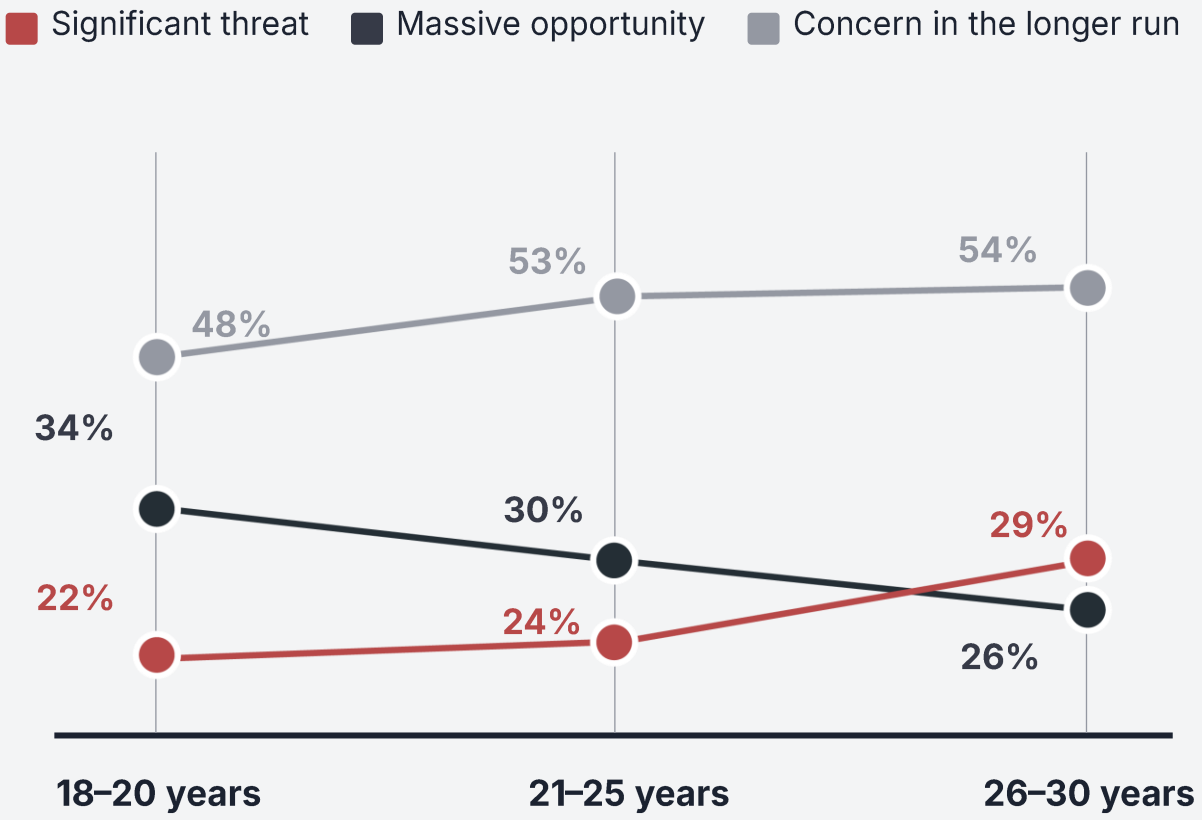
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q12, rank 1

03.

THE YOUNG INDIANS MOST SCARED OF AI ARE THE ONES REFUSING TO LEARN IT

Optimism about AI fades as young people get closer to work

How they view AI's impact on their career, by age



WHAT IT TELLS US

Among 18–20 year olds, more see AI as a massive opportunity (34%) than a significant threat (22%). By 26–30 the lines have crossed: 29% see a threat, 26% an opportunity.

Those already working are more anxious than students: 27% vs 22% see a significant threat, and 56% vs 47% a longer-run concern.

Most hold more than one view at once: the options add up to 174%, a sign of ambivalence rather than a fixed stance.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800).

03.

THE YOUNG INDIANS MOST SCARED OF AI ARE THE ONES REFUSING TO LEARN IT

To a large group, the **threat of AI** feels distant



WHAT IT TELLS US

52% say AI is a concern for the longer run but will not affect them any time soon.

At respondent level, about **45%** see AI purely as a threat, and only about **25%** purely as an opportunity.

Higher education brings more suspicion, not urgency: **61%** of postgraduates see AI as a long-run concern, and **51%** think it won't make a big difference.

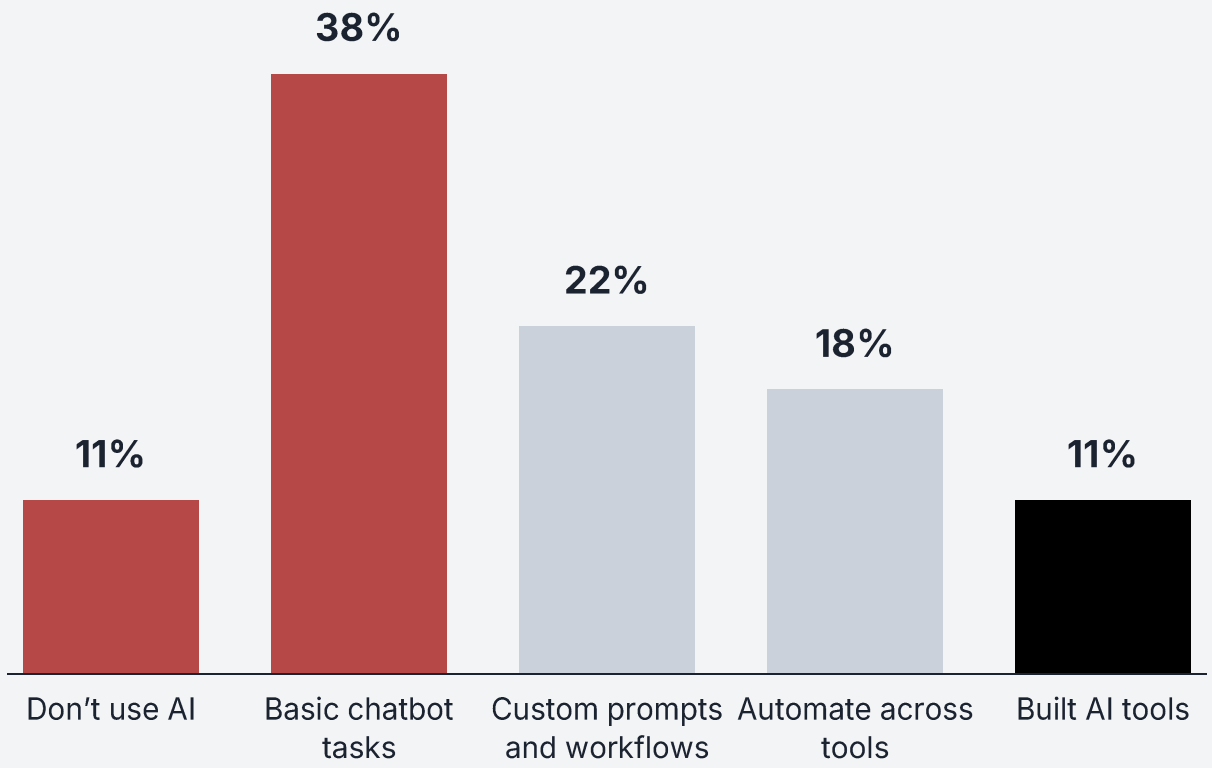
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q8, multiple responses allowed

03.

THE YOUNG INDIANS MOST SCARED OF AI ARE THE ONES REFUSING TO LEARN IT

Fear should have led to adoption, yet the primary use of AI is still basic

Level of hands-on experience with AI tools



WHAT IT TELLS US

49% either

- Don’t use AI tools (**11%**) or
- Use them only for basic tasks like asking questions or drafting documents (**38%**).

Only **11%** have built any tools on AI platforms, as rare as those who don’t use AI at all.

The rural-raised lead on automating across tools (**21% vs 13%** in metros).

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q9

03.

THE YOUNG INDIANS MOST SCARED OF AI ARE THE ONES REFUSING TO LEARN IT

Those who feel most threatened are the **least likely to learn**

51%

plan to take an AI course in the next three to six months

63%

would pay for an AI course themselves

THE UNFORTUNATE REALITY

Fear should have led to adoption. Instead, those who see AI as a threat are the least likely to enroll in AI training, and the least willing to pay for it themselves.

It is the same reason people put off a medical test they are worried about: the more we fear the result, the longer we avoid finding out.

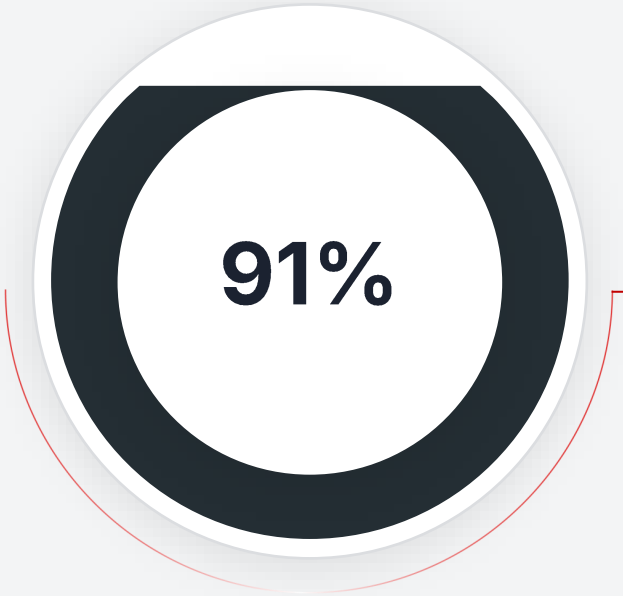
The appetite is there among the confident. Voluntary programmes will keep training the people who need it least.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q8, Q10, Q11

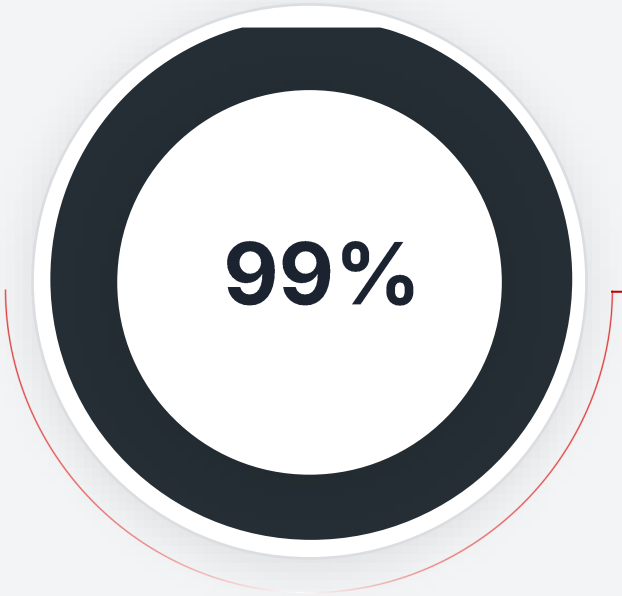
EDUCATION WAS GREAT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

04. Gen Z does not think college failed them, yet **it wasn't enough** for what the job market demands

The education story is more promising than we had imagined. The gap lies in applying what was learnt, and there is maturity in recognizing that this gap now has to be filled by themselves.



call their **academic qualification** effective



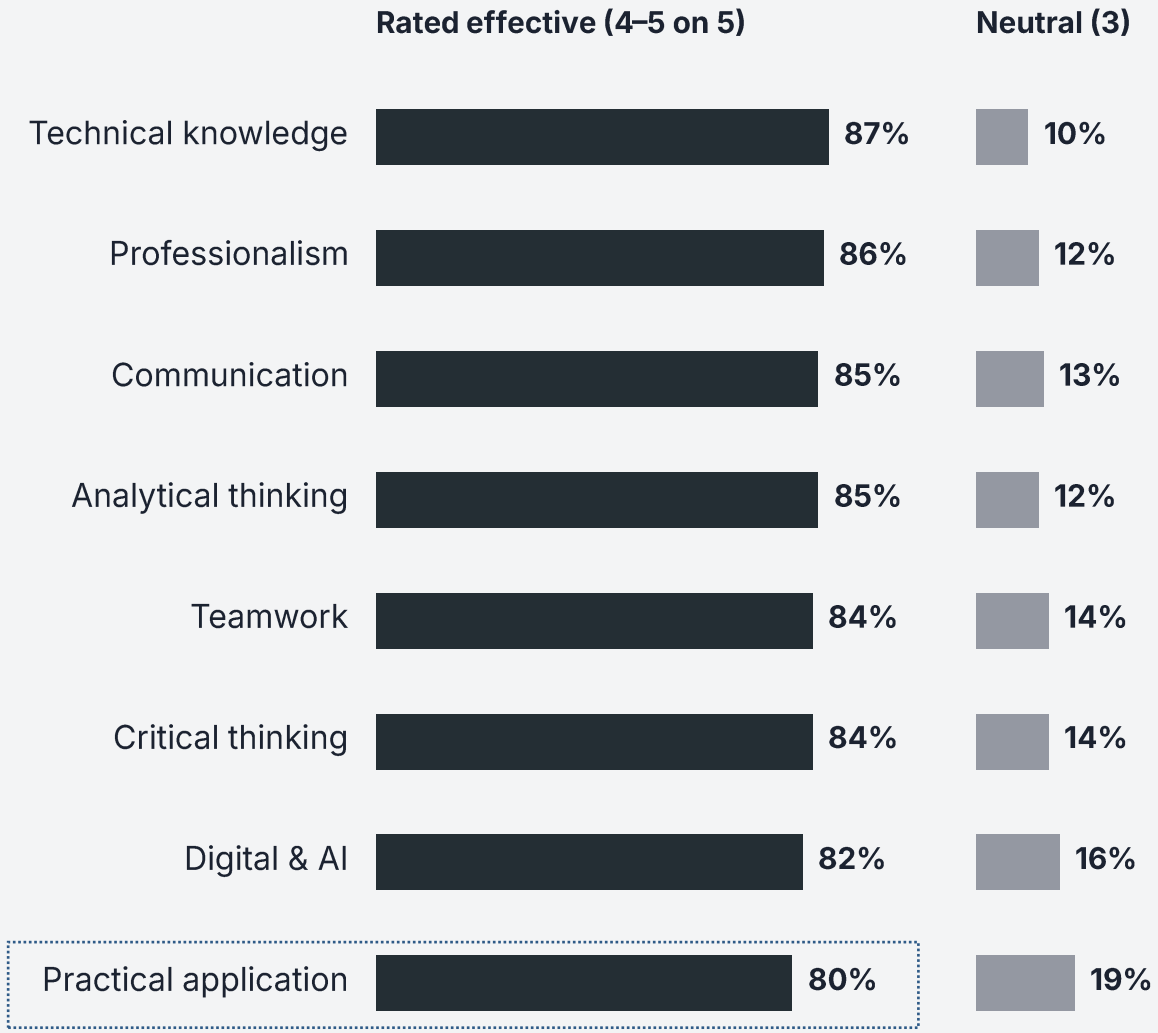
still **have gaps to close** before they are truly employable

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q16, Q19

04.

EDUCATION WAS GREAT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

The **gap** primarily lies in **application**



WHAT IT TELLS US

87% are satisfied with their technical education, but practical application draws the most lukewarm scores of any skill (**80%** effective, **19%** neutral).

The gap widens outside the metros: **88%** of the metro-raised rate it effective vs **75%** of the rural-raised.

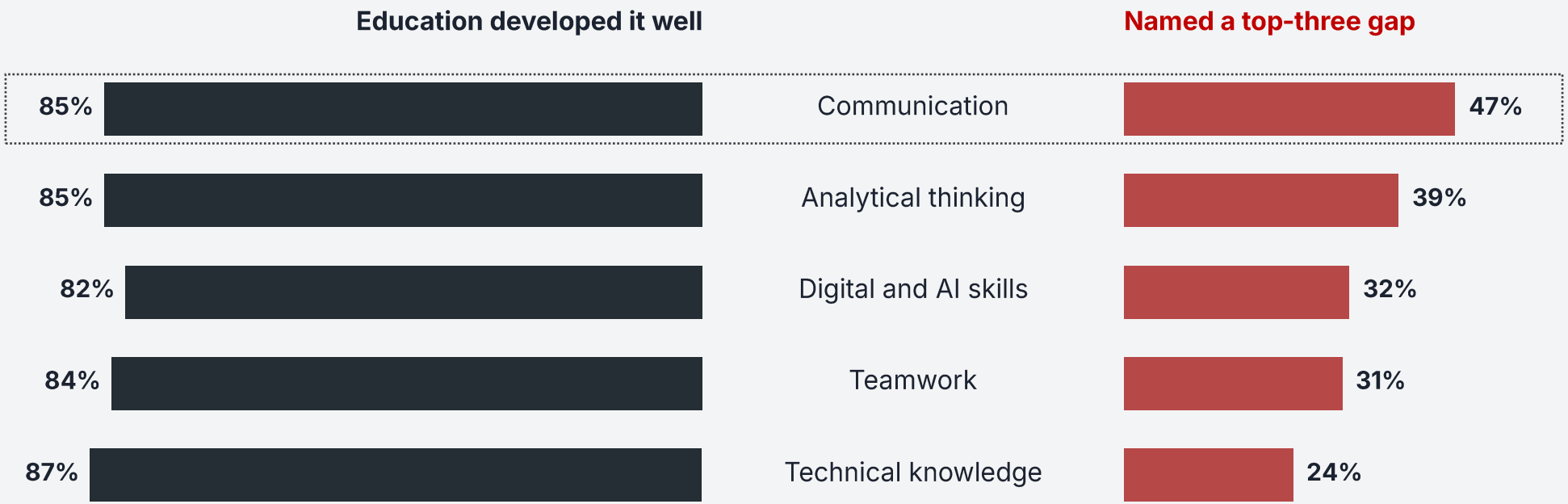
Digital and AI skills score second-lowest (**82%**).

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q18

04.

EDUCATION WAS GREAT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

Communication shows the same split: rated well taught, yet the biggest gap



85% say their education developed communication well, yet **47%** name it the skill they most need to improve, ahead of analytical skills (**39%**) and AI and digital skills (**32%**).

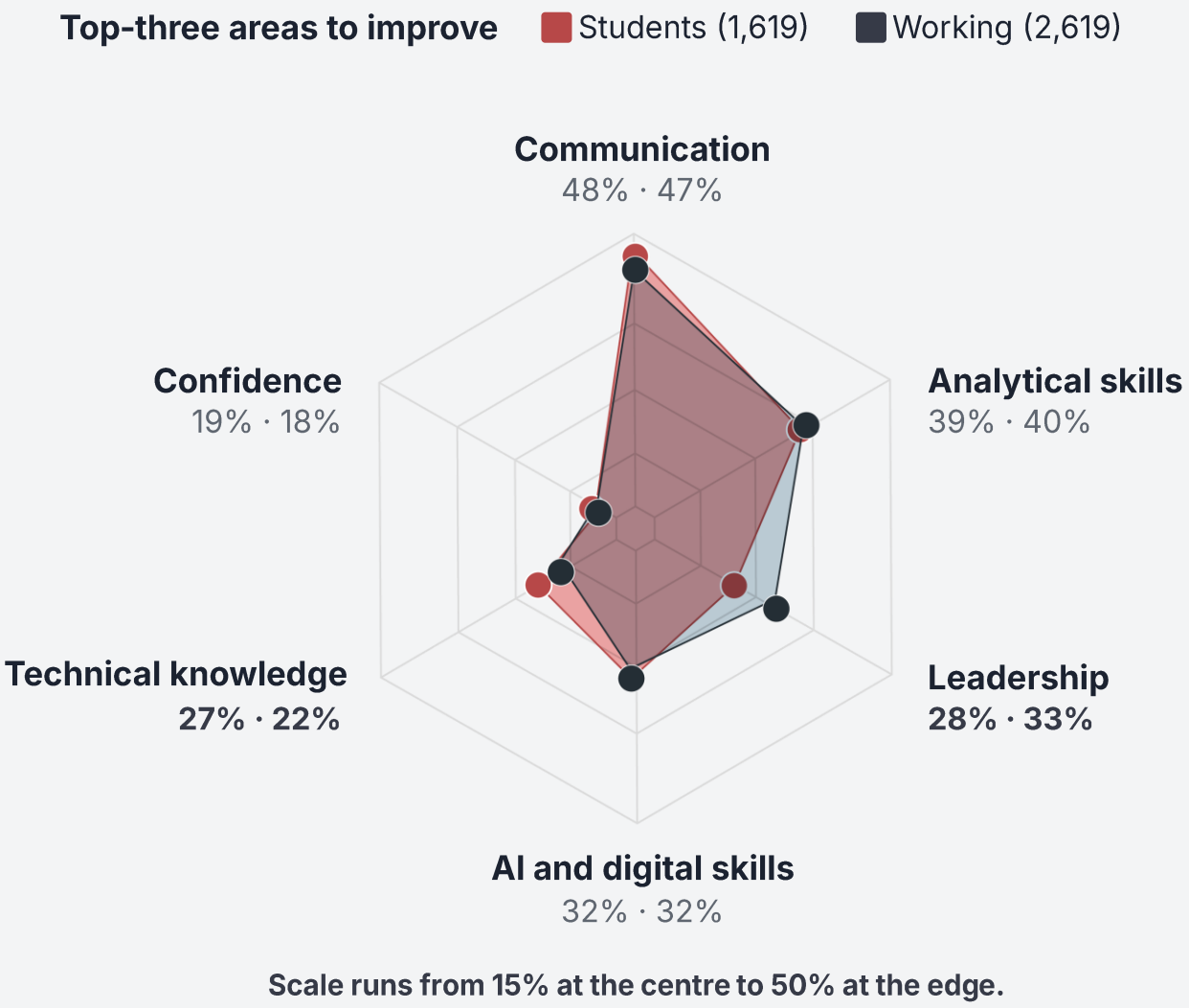
It tops the gap list in every upbringing group, peaking at **51%** among the urban-raised. Confidence in what was taught is not the same as readiness for work.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q18, Q19

04.

EDUCATION WAS GREAT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

Students already see the gap; work moves it to leadership



Students already know the gap is there

Skill ratings are almost identical before and after entering work, within 3 points. This is not hindsight from people who struggled at work.

Employability doesn't close the gap on its own

Practical application stays the weakest-rated skill (80% for both groups), and communication remains a top gap for 48% and 47%.

The gap moves from knowing to leading

Students worry more about technical knowledge (27% vs 22%); those working worry more about leadership (33% vs 28%).

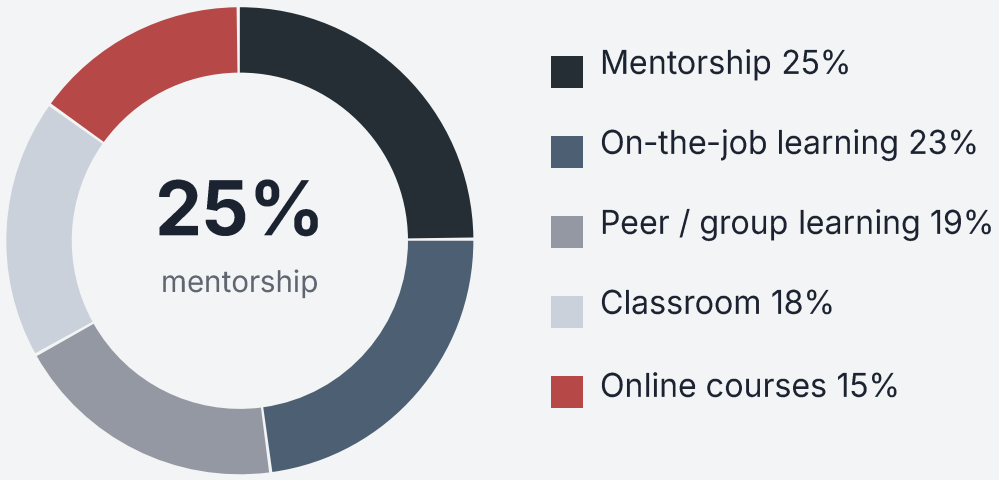
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800).

04.

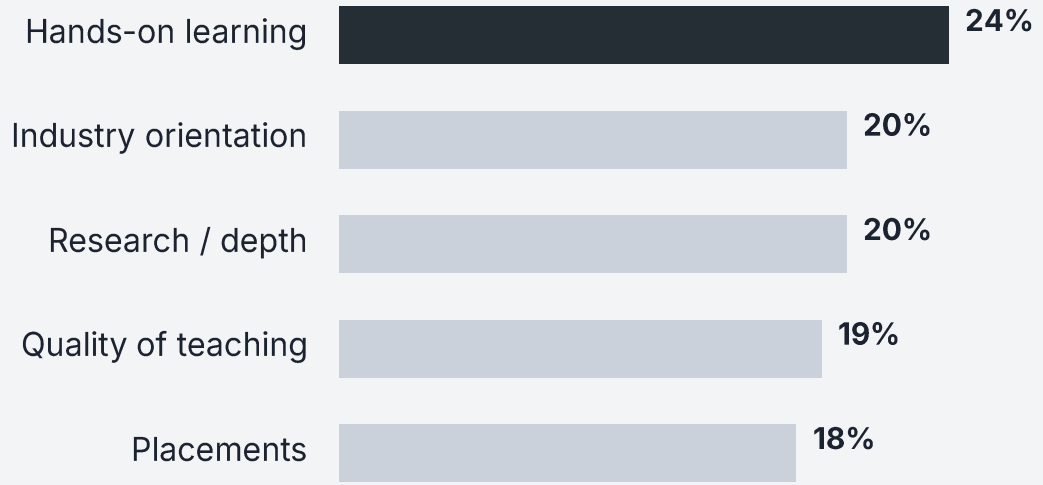
EDUCATION WAS GREAT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

Their top demand is not better lectures but better **hands-on learning**

Preferred way to learn a new skill (rank 1)



Top expectation of their college (rank 1)



They want to learn through mentorship (**25%**) and on the job (**23%**), not through online courses (**15%**), the format most corporate learning budgets are built around; among the rural-raised, just **9%** prefer online courses.

Hands-on learning leads expectations of colleges (**24%**), while the rural-raised put quality of teaching first (**26%**).

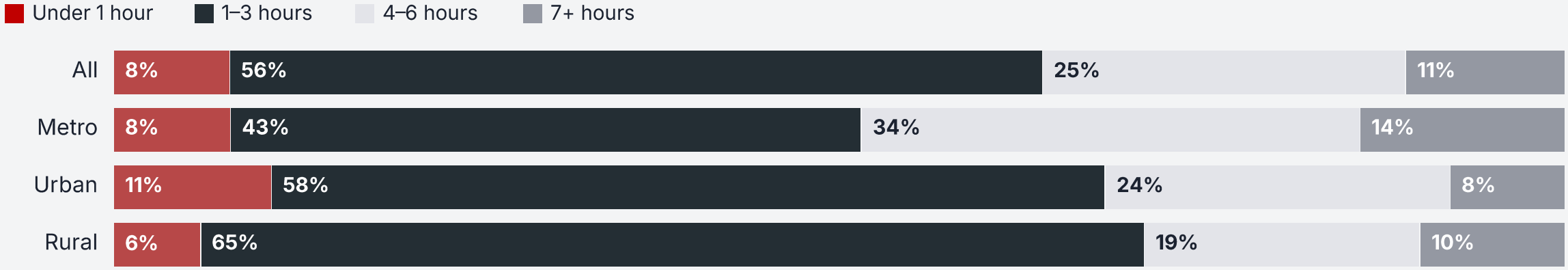
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q13, Q17

04.

EDUCATION WAS GREAT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

There is maturity to own the gap, but **little time to fill it**

Hours a week they can realistically give to upskilling: 64% can give three or fewer, rising to 71% among the rural-raised



Who should bear the cost and time of upskilling: the metro-raised are the likeliest to expect a shared cost (32%)

54%

say upskilling is their own responsibility

23%

say it should be shared with the employer

16%

say the employer should bear it

8%

look to institutions or government

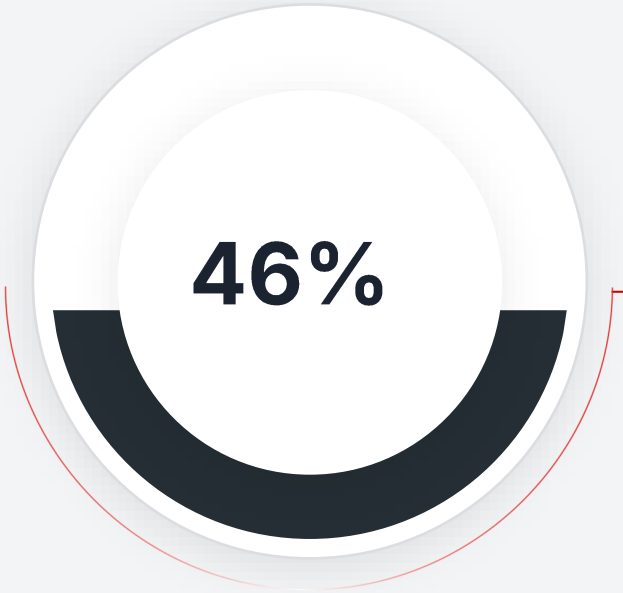
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q14, Q15

05.

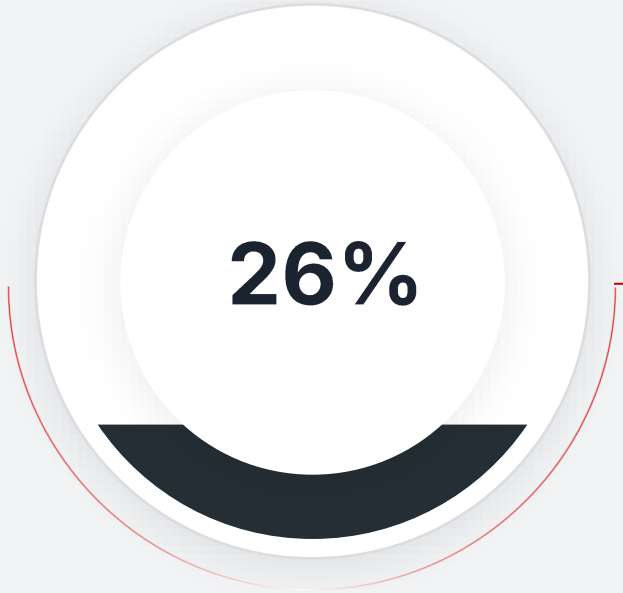
THE RISK TAKERS DON'T COME FROM THE METROS

The boldest young Indians in this survey did not grow up in Mumbai or Bengaluru

This split goes further: those raised in rural India are more likely to put rapid growth ahead of stability and less likely to turn down gig work.



Of those raised in **rural India** are extremely **willing to join an early-stage startup**



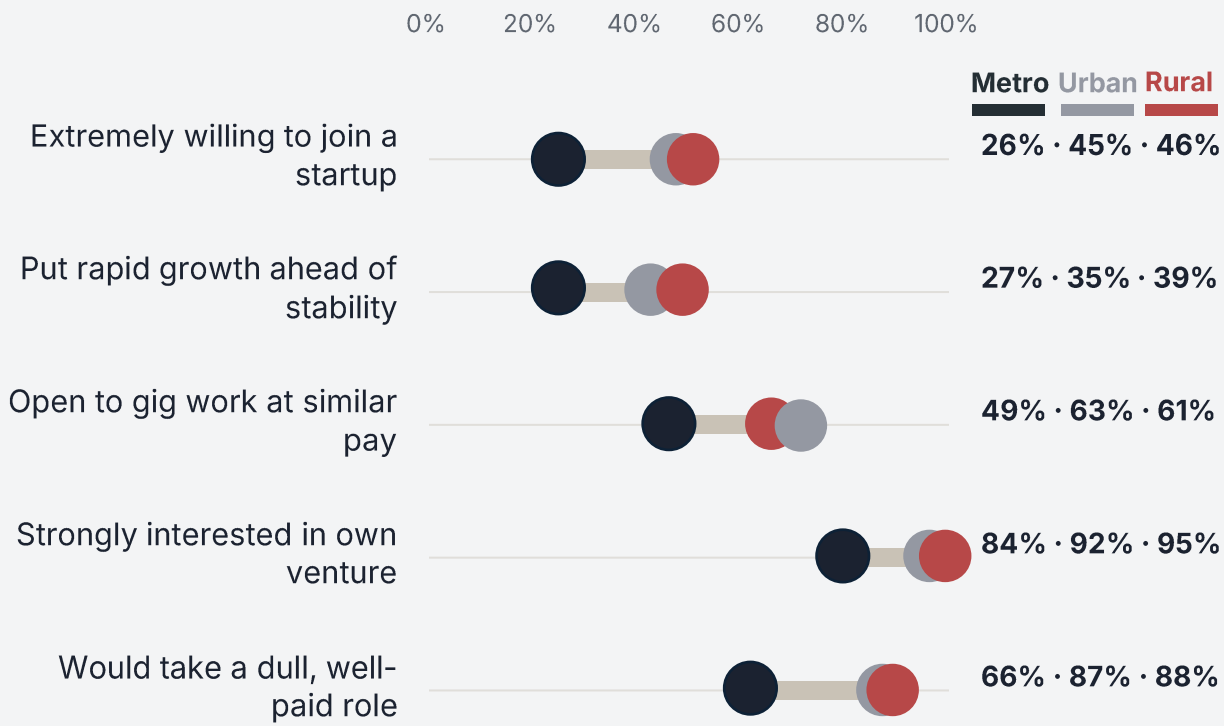
Of those **raised in the metros** say the same

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q24

05.

THE RISK TAKERS DON'T COME FROM THE METROS

This split goes further on every measure of risk



Irrespective of upbringing, **more women show a stronger willingness to become entrepreneurs than men**: Almost half of women are "extremely interested" in being founders, ten percent points ahead of men.

WHAT IT TELLS US

On each measure, the metro-raised sit furthest to the left.

A metro upbringing may come with more of a safety net, and so more to lose. For young people from smaller towns, risk is the route up.

Only **5%** of the rural-raised show little interest in their own venture, against **16%** in the metros.

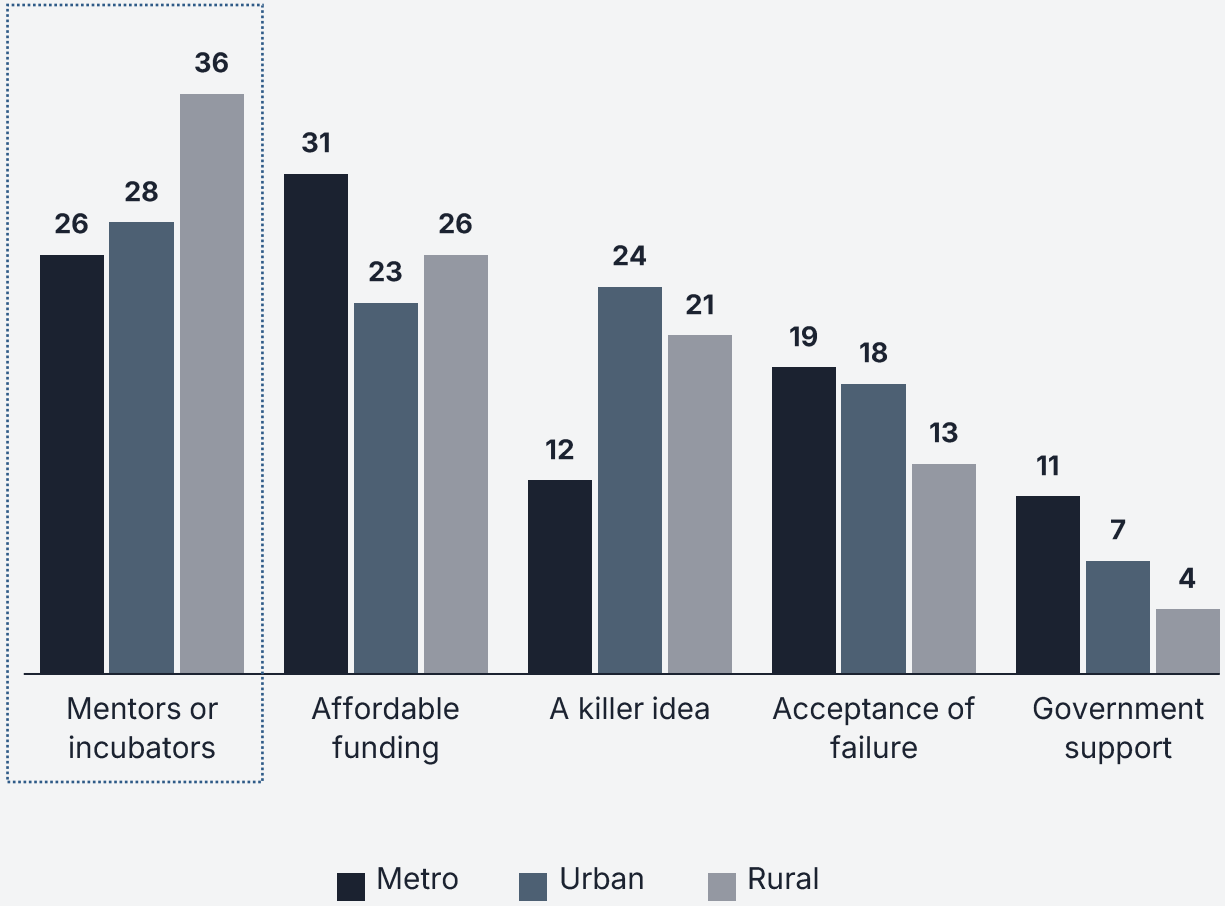
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q4, Q5, Q7, Q23, Q24

05.

THE RISK TAKERS DON'T COME FROM THE METROS

Entrepreneurship needs active handholding to take the leap

Most important enabler for entrepreneurship (rank 1)



WHAT IT TELLS US

91% want to start a venture someday, and **78%** would join an early-stage company.

Mentorship and incubation support is the most important enabler (**30%**; **36%** among the rural-raised), just ahead of affordable funding (**27%**), and well ahead of the confidence of a killer idea (**19%**).

For women entrepreneurs, funding ranks at par with mentorship and incubation support.

Government support is not a factor for most (**7%**)

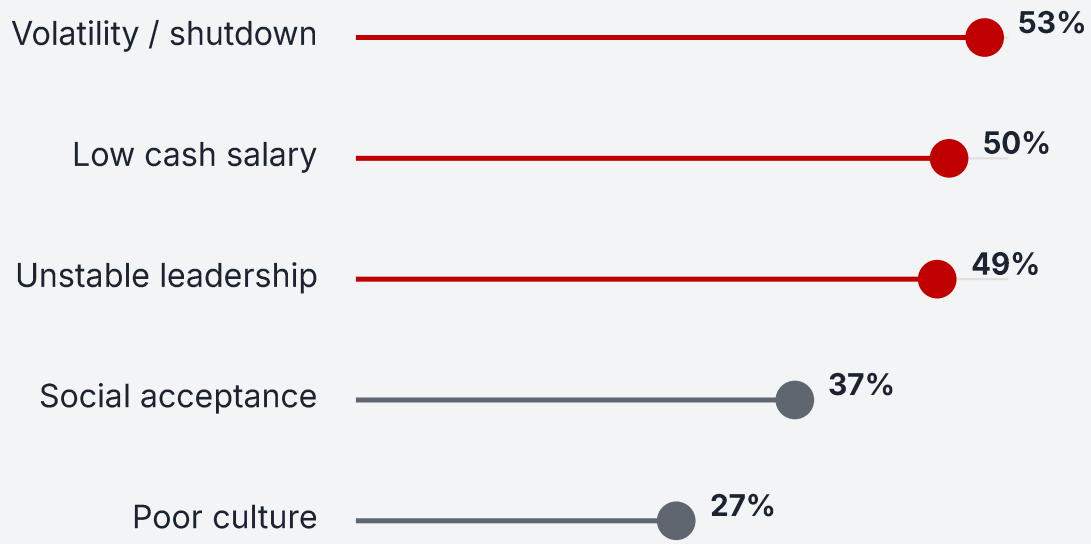
Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q23, Q24, Q25 rank 1

05.

THE RISK TAKERS DON'T COME FROM THE METROS

They **take risks** when there is a **safety net underneath**

Fears about working in a startup



Why **42%** would turn down gig work

71% **miss the benefits** of a full-time job, like healthcare and insurance

66% need a **regular salary**

27% worry about **social acceptance**

Startup fears centre on **volatility** (**53%**), **low cash pay** (**50%**) and **unstable leadership** (**49%**), and the **rural-raised worry most about pay** (**58%**). For **gig work**, it is missing benefits and irregular income, **not stigma**, that hold young Indians back.

Source: upGrad Next Gen Z survey, Aug–Sep 2026 (n=11,800). Q4a (base: 1,800), Q26; multiple responses allowed

WHAT IT MEANS

A consistent pattern: young Indians take risks when there is a safety net

What these insights mean for employers, educational institutions and policy makers



IMPLICATIONS · EMPLOYERS

The **employer brand** needs to go back to the core



Go back to the core

The employer brand must lead with career growth and effective rewards with job security, not get distracted into discussing "purpose".



Compensation matters, a lot!

81% are happy to take a boring job so long as it pays well, a likely sign of tougher job markets that companies must acknowledge.



Guidance over packaged content

Guidance and mentorship are a critical need for this generation, way more than packaged learning content.



Growth means promotions and experiences

Career growth is both. Organizations need to communicate how growth happens on both counts.



Outcome-based learning, in small packages

Link learning visibly to career paths, blend it with hands-on mentorship, and keep it to a couple of hours a week.



Employers must own AI training

Those who fear AI are least likely to enrol or pay. Show the educated sceptics how to add value with AI, not just how the tools work.

Train for **action**, not recall



Make hands-on learning the core mode

It is the #1 expectation young Indians have of their institutions. NEP 2020 built internships into every discipline; extend this by co-designing curricula with industry practitioners, including live client projects and field work.



Design examinations that measure action, not recall

Students say they have learnt enough but aren't trained for work: over **90%** call their education effective, yet **99%** still see gaps. Simulation-based education and testing may reduce this gap.



Soft skills are as important as domain skills

The World Economic Forum and ILO have long highlighted the multiplier benefits of soft skills training. Young Indians name communication as their biggest gap between education and career (**47%**).



Provide human coaching alongside online programmes

Simple steps, like a few hours every fortnight or month with a mentor to clarify doubts, will add significantly greater value to large-format online programmes.

IMPLICATIONS · POLICY MAKERS

Build the **safety nets** that **unlock risk-taking**



Structured benefits for gig careers

Structured and disciplined benefits programmes will make freelance and gig careers more real: **71%** of those averse to gig jobs cite missing benefits. After the aggregator contribution rate is notified, include life insurance and accident cover in e-Shram, and focus registration drives on non-metro areas, where over **60%** are keen on gig work.



Verifiable work records for gig experience

Women and metro-raised respondents cite social acceptance as a hindrance to choosing gig work (**27%** of those averse to it). Part of this hesitation could be addressed if employers recognised gig experience as valid, backed by verifiable records.



Fund mentorship and incubator programmes

Young Indians rank mentors and incubators ahead of affordable capital as the top enabler of entrepreneurship (**30% vs 27%**). Offer women entrepreneurs credit and mentorship together.

IN CLOSING

This generation is building its **own safety net.** Organizations that help them build it will **win their talent.**

