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# **Serving the future: young talent aims high in APAC hospitality and tourism**



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# About this report

*Serving the future: young talent aims high in APAC hospitality and tourism* is an Economist Impact report, supported by the Macao Government Tourism Office. It explores the role of young professionals in the future of hospitality and tourism<sup>1</sup> in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region. The analysis draws on two surveys conducted in July 2025: one of 308 young workers and students, the other of 311 senior executives.<sup>2</sup> Additional insights were obtained from in-depth interviews with senior industry executives, young industry professionals and other experts. We thank the following for their time:

- **Samantha Marion**, director of global partnerships, Asian Institute of Hospitality Management, Thailand
- **Sangeetha Liyanapathirana**, senior manager, health and safety, Resplendent Ceylon, Sri Lanka
- **Andrew Newmark**, chief human resources officer, Asia-Pacific, Marriott International, Singapore
- **Jane Park**, assistant manager, food and beverage revenue management and operations, Hotel Icon, Hong Kong
- **Yuth Thongcharoen**, lecturer, global hospitality management, Asian Institute of Hospitality Management, Thailand
- **Mark Watson**, senior assistant vice-president and group director, sustainability and impact, Banyan Group, Singapore

Economist Impact bears sole responsibility for the content of this report. The findings and views expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the interviewees or sponsors. The research was led by Charles Ross and Divya Sharma. The report was written by Denis McCauley and copyedited by Caroline Carter.

# Executive summary

Asia-Pacific's hospitality and tourism industry has returned to growth after the lean years of the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> But a lingering shortage of talent poses a significant constraint on business expansion plans, and organisations are competing fiercely to recruit and retain the young talent who want to work in the industry. At the same time, shifting customer expectations, technological advances and growing pressure to operate sustainably are transforming the industry.

Industry executives in the region are keenly aware that attracting and keeping younger colleagues now will better position their organisations to harness these forces. Our research reveals a young workforce and aspiring entrants highly motivated to embrace change in the industry in order to serve their own development. Based on two parallel surveys of young talent and senior executives, the research also illuminates the challenges hospitality and tourism organisations face in aligning strategic objectives with those of their young workforce.

## Key findings:

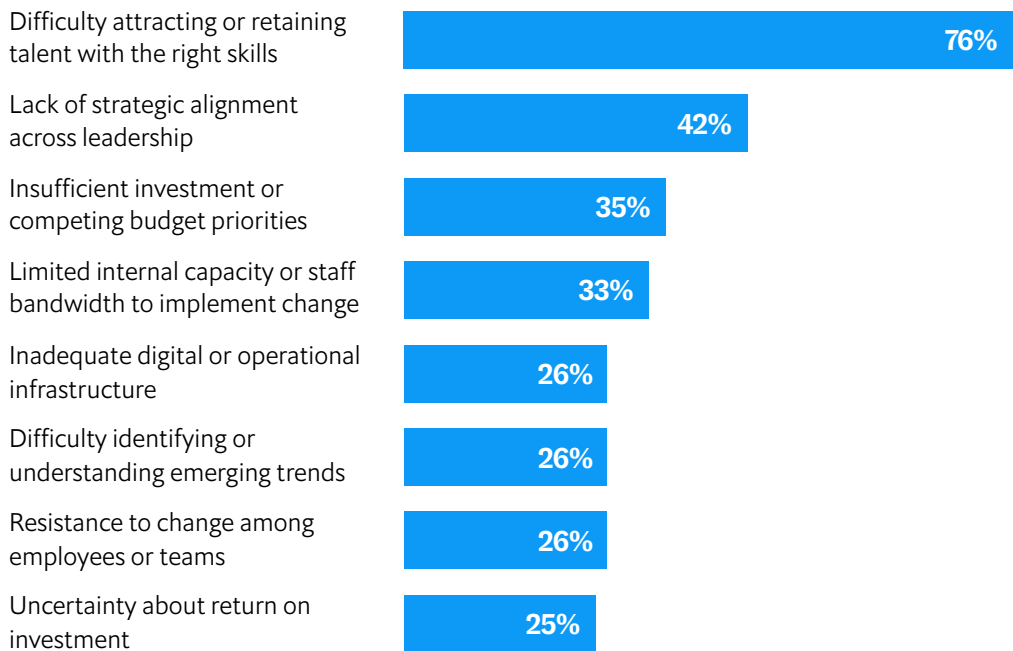
- **Young workers are optimistic about their futures.** Many (67%) of the young people surveyed are passionate about serving and interacting with guests and nearly all (94%) would recommend such a career to their peers. More than 85% of all surveyed respondents express excitement about the opportunities that digitalisation and use of new technologies bring to the sector. Many also see potential for the industry to enhance sustainability.
- **Many lack digital skills.** Few of the young people surveyed express anxiety about the potential for automation-related threats to jobs. But many (61%) are concerned that they lack the skills to use new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), effectively. A majority of executives agree with that assessment.
- **Young workers are more interested in training than pay.** Their concerns about skills feed into a strong demand for greater access to training and upskilling programmes. Around twice as many young professionals cite this, as well as clearer career growth opportunities (73% and 74% respectively), than cite better remuneration (37%) as an important way to support and retain talent.
- **Unmet sustainability promises risk creating disillusionment.** Young talent have high hopes of helping their organisations improve their sustainability and environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance. But relatively few surveyed organisations (27%) treat this as a strategic priority. With a large proportion (83%) of young professionals in the survey already unimpressed with the sector's environmental performance, employers risk weakening their young entrants' loyalty on this score.
- **Soft skills can help new models blossom.** Both groups value highly soft skills like emotional intelligence and empathy as ingredients for success in the sector (cited by 67% of managers and 61% of young talent). Neither group identifies them as traits young people lack. This bodes well for organisations seeking to develop new lines in experiential tourism, ecotourism and other areas.

# A passion to serve

Demand for hospitality and tourism in APAC has largely recovered from its covid-19 doldrums.<sup>4</sup> But labour supply in the sector remains extremely tight. Many experienced staff lost their jobs during the shutdowns in 2020 and 2021 and have not returned, and the sector is having difficulty attracting new talent to replace them.<sup>5</sup> Operators of hotels in Asia, for example, reported persistent staff shortages in 2024 and expected them to continue into 2025.<sup>6</sup> In Japan, the tourism industry faces a projected shortfall of more than 500,000 workers by 2030.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the hospitality and tourism executives we surveyed believe the biggest challenge their businesses face over the medium term is finding and retaining talent. More than three-quarters (76%) cite this among their top challenges, far more than they cite any other. Nearly as many (72%) consider meeting it to be a top strategic priority.

**Figure 1: Management anxieties over talent**

*The biggest organisational challenges hospitality and tourism businesses face (% of executive respondents)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

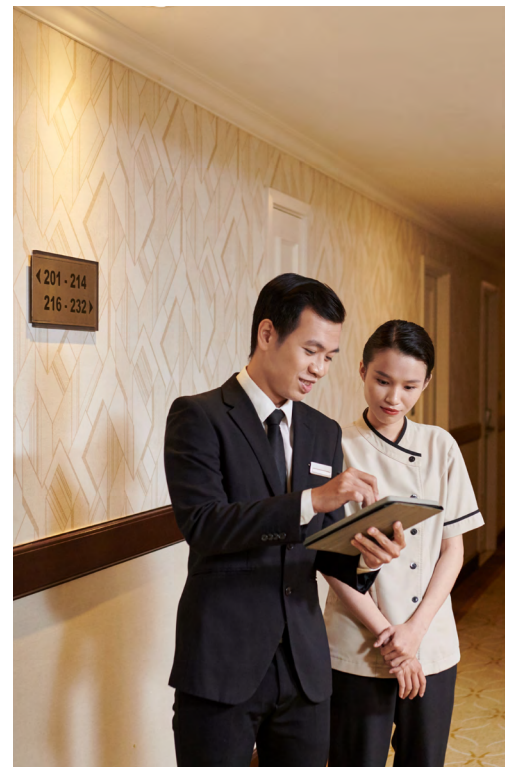
The need to recruit and retain staff will be especially acute for companies with ambitious growth plans. Andrew Newmark, chief human resources officer at Marriott International, highlights this, “Last year we opened around 75 hotels across the region, and we are likely to surpass that figure this year. If we grow as planned, we’ll add around 20,000 jobs over the next two years.”

Training providers report that their graduates are in very high demand. Samantha Marion, director of global partnerships at the Asian Institute of Hospitality Management (AIHM) in Bangkok, Thailand says that its young professionals are being offered jobs a year or more before they graduate. Some employers joke by telling them not to finish their degree but come and work for them right away.

Many hotels in APAC have increased wages and benefits to tackle staff shortages.<sup>8</sup> However, the young talent in our survey see other factors as more important. Nearly three-quarters (74%) cite clearer career paths and 73% want more training, more than twice the share who prioritise higher pay (37%). Yet when asked what hinders progress, they cite poor access to training (72%), weak guidance from managers (43%), unclear career paths (43%), little time to learn on the job (29%) and few chances to take on responsibility (27%). The very opportunities they say would keep them in the sector are those they find hardest to secure.

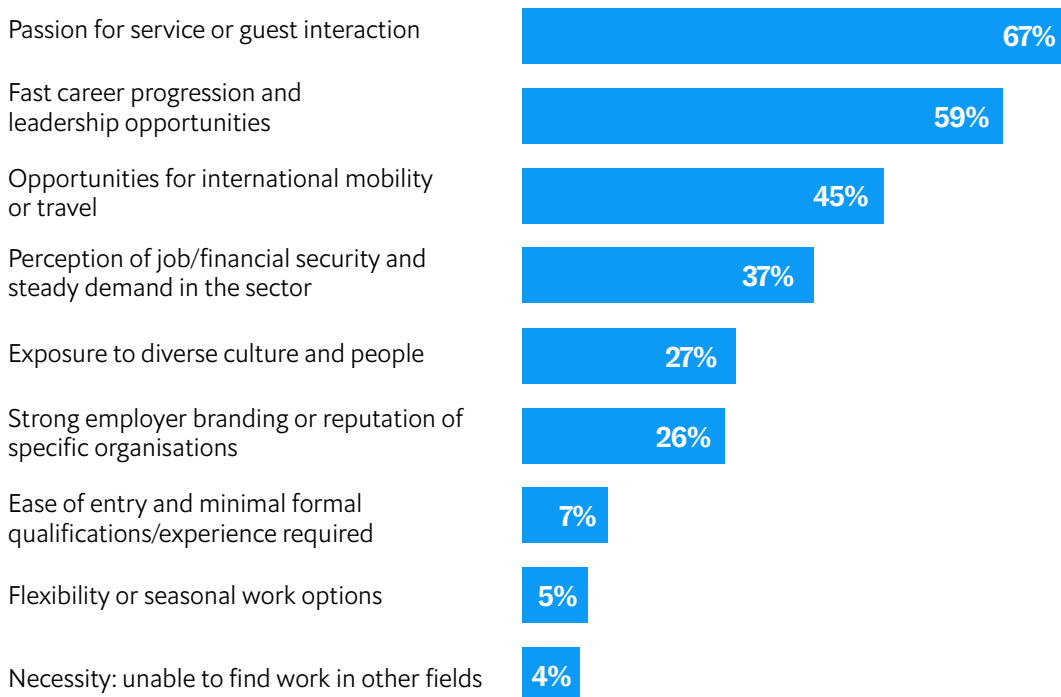
Despite these barriers, the young talent appear excited and optimistic about their future. Almost all (94%) would recommend a career in the industry to other young people. “I’m more confident than ever about our shared future as hospitality professionals,” says Sangeetha Liyanapathirana, senior manager for health and safety at Resplendent Ceylon hotels. “Across the industry, there are tremendous opportunities for people with expertise like ours.”

Young professionals are also highly optimistic about some of the major trends impacting the sector, including adoption of AI and sustainability. And their principal motivation for pursuing such a career—a passion for service and guest interaction (cited by 67%)—points to the values shaping the future workforce. Yuth Thongcharoen, a lecturer in global hospitality management at AIHM, echoes this. His students “all claim to be highly motivated by money and salary. But when I delve deeper, it’s the guest interactions, the opportunity to make an impact and the recognition for hard work. The issue of monetary gains doesn’t usually come up.”



**Figure 2: The desire to serve**

*The top reasons young talent choose or consider a career in the hospitality and tourism sector (% of young talent respondents)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

**Harnessing young minds**

To stay innovative and retain staff, APAC’s hospitality and tourism industry can make room for the ideas of younger workers. The Marriott NextGen Business Council is designed to tap the innovative impulses of the hotel chain’s young staff, with groups set up in several APAC countries. Mr Newmark describes the councils as collaborative platforms that bring together young professionals from across Marriott hotels in each market to discuss ideas for improving the business. Council members put those ideas in front of senior executives at regional or higher level for further discussion and implementation. He says: “We engage these talents to look at hotel service provision or our sales and marketing efforts and brainstorm with them about how we can do things differently.” Many of these ideas also involve Marriott’s sustainability efforts and engagement with local communities. He adds: “It’s a great way to engage our talents with meaningful initiatives and gain new perspectives, while developing future leaders. It also helps foster collaboration and teamwork across our hotels.”

The same approach is evident at industry level. The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, for instance, has a Youth Leaders Advisory Council which brings together young leaders from member firms, including in Asia, to feed ideas into programmes and leadership discussions. It gives the sector a channel for youth perspectives and a pathway for ideas to reach decision-makers.<sup>9</sup>

# Digital dividends

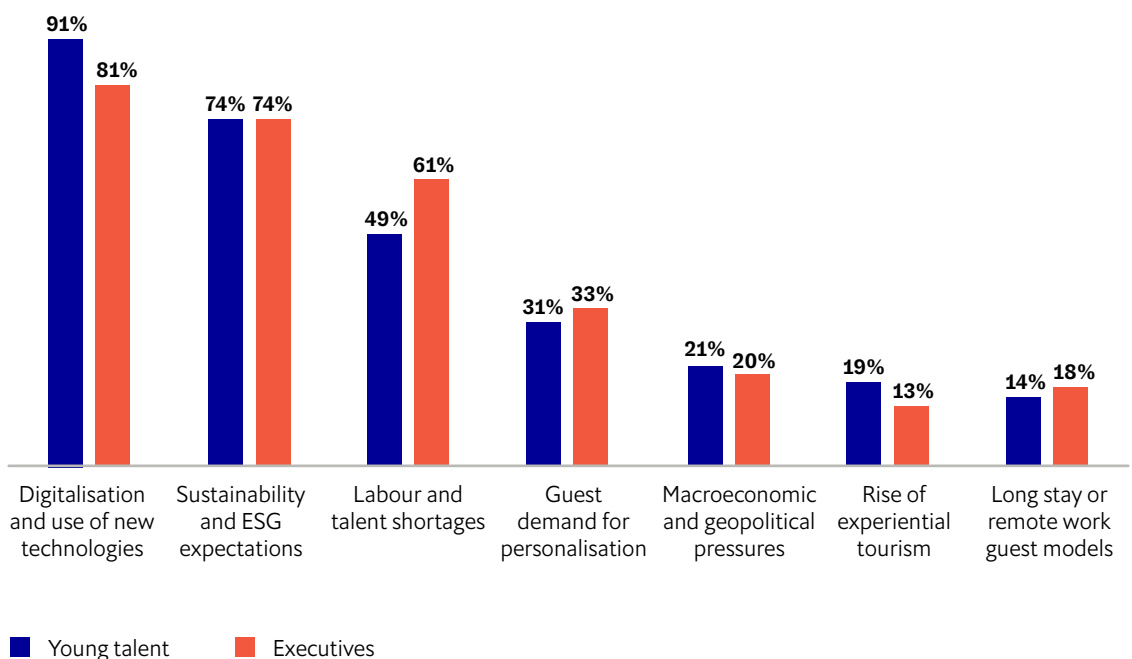
Digitalisation and technology are spreading steadily across APAC’s hospitality and tourism sector. Take AI, for example. Hotels are starting to integrate the technology into their digital transformation strategies.<sup>10</sup> Cebu Pacific, in the Philippines,<sup>11</sup> and Air India<sup>12</sup> now use AI chatbots for customer support. And Singapore Airlines uses it for enhanced data analysis and insight generation.<sup>13</sup> Travellers in APAC are also particularly keen to use AI: a recent study by Booking.com, a travel site, found that 93% of consumers in the region want to use it in their future travel plans.<sup>14</sup>

Hotels across the region are also using other technologies to bring to life new service models. The latter include “hybrid hospitality”, an approach blending physical and virtual experiences.<sup>15</sup> According to one research firm, APAC accounted for over 40% of global tourism sector revenue from virtual reality (VR) in 2023.<sup>16</sup> Hotels in China are innovating with “smart” rooms as well as VR and augmented reality for immersive room previews.<sup>17</sup> Japanese hotels are adopting multilingual digital concierge services, allowing guests to access information, make reservations and request services using mobile apps.<sup>18</sup>

Both the young talent and executives we surveyed anticipate that, over the next three years, digitalisation will have a greater impact on hospitality and tourism in APAC than any other development. Only expectations for sustainability and ESG-related measures come close to being mentioned as frequently.

**Figure 3: Forces to reckon with**

*Trends expected to have the heaviest impact on hospitality and tourism over the next two to three years (% of young talent and executive respondents)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

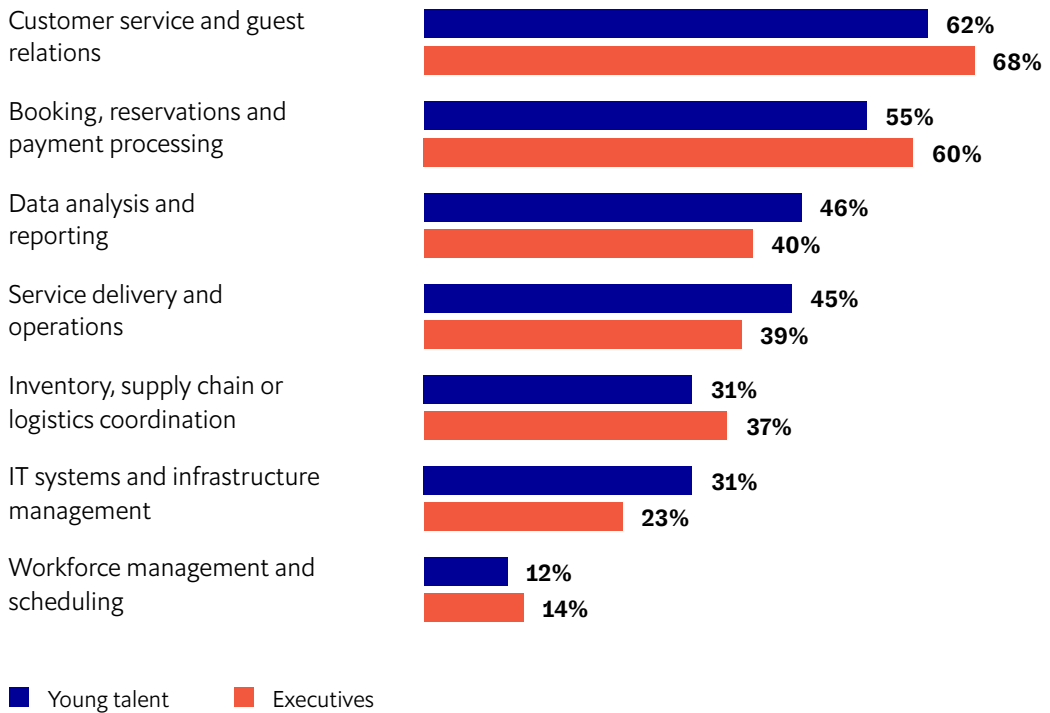
### Tech enthusiasm

Our young professionals are hugely positive about what digitalisation could offer them. More than eight in ten (81%) are “excited” about such opportunities, and another 18% are “optimistic”. Ms Liyanapathirana shares this sentiment: “I’m enjoying working with enterprise technology systems. For example, I now use a platform that lets me do hotel audits online. At head office or at home, I can understand the daily safety status of each hotel in our group. That’s been a new experience for me.”

Young people’s openness to digital tools is mirrored in their attitudes toward automation. Far from fearing their jobs will be displaced, nearly nine in ten (87%) say they are “excited” about the positive impact that automation (and personalisation) technologies will have on the sector. Asked where they expect automation to bring the most change, our young talent and executives agree that its biggest impacts will be felt in customer service and guest relations, in reservations and payment processing, in data analysis and reporting, and in service delivery.

**Figure 4: Ripe for digital transformation**

*Areas of operation deemed most likely to be automated or significantly reshaped by AI or other digital tools in the next two to three years (% of young talent and executive respondents)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

Much of that automation will be driven by AI. “We’re at the early stages of the AI journey,” says Mr Newmark, “but it’s clearly the way forward. That’s why we’re equipping our associates not only with AI tools, but also with learning programmes and development support so they can grow, innovate and build lasting careers with us.”

Jane Park, assistant manager of food and beverage revenue management and operations at Hotel Icon in Hong Kong (and a graduate of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at Hong Kong Polytechnic University), looks forward to using AI more widely in her work. “It’s helping to reduce our workload so we can focus more on empathy, tuning into needs and enhancing the guest experience through personalisation.”

Mr Thongcharoen notes that his students are excited about AI, but he also preaches caution. “As educators, we need to guide them in the correct use of AI models to ensure they use them safely and in ways that create value.”

### Upskilling for the digitally savvy

Despite the enthusiastic uptake of digitalisation, hospitality and tourism businesses have only just begun to tap into its potential. Of executives who cite digitalisation as likely to have a major impact on their organisations, few (8%) say those organisations are mostly or fully digitised today.

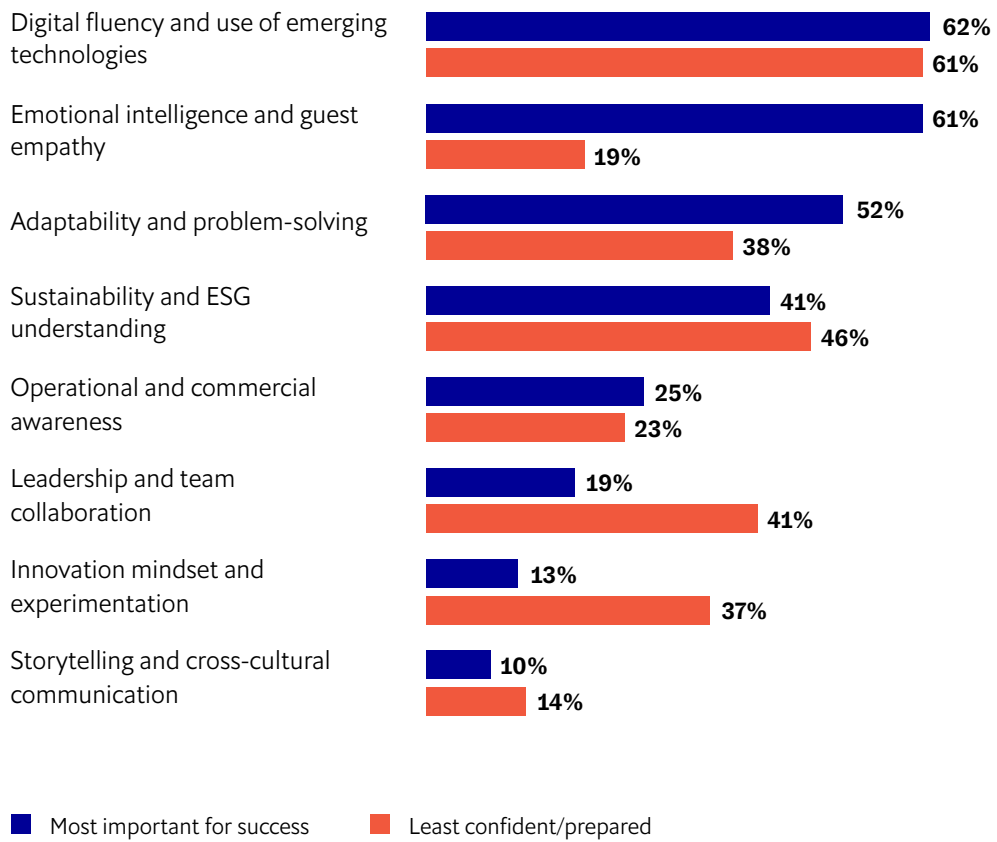
However, most surveyed organisations (62%) are scaling up and expanding implementation of digital initiatives. This should give young employees more scope to build digital skills, including in the use of emerging technologies such as AI. The majority of young talent (62%) believe such skills are key to their success in the sector. But almost the same percentage (61%) feel unprepared to use new technologies effectively today, and most executives (74%) agree such skills are lacking in young colleagues. Bridging this skills gap will be critical not only for retaining talent, but also for ensuring organisations can fully realise the benefits of digital transformation.



“The younger generation are intuitively quicker than older ones at picking up digital skills,” says Mr Thongcharoen. “At the same time, there are many students who’ve gone on internships and felt that they could have done with more formal training on software systems that are used across their sponsors’ organisations.”

**Figure 5: Do young professionals have the skills to thrive?**

*Skills deemed by young talent to be most critical for career growth in hospitality and tourism and those about which they feel least confident or prepared (% of young talent respondents)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

# Sustainability and responsible tourism

While young talent and seasoned executives hold similar views about the key forces impacting hospitality and tourism, sustainability is a partial exception. Disconnects in this area could later feed disillusionment among today's young professionals.

Studies conducted in recent years document the importance that many APAC consumers attach to sustainable tourism. In one, 52% stated that sustainable tourism is very important to them.<sup>19</sup> On the surface, both groups of respondents agree that pressure from stakeholders, such as consumers, governments and civil society, to pursue sustainability and ESG initiatives will have a significant impact on organisations over the next three years (Figure 3).

As with digitalisation, young talent are "excited" or "optimistic" about the opportunities they may have to contribute to green initiatives as well as the possibility of using that to improve their own career prospects. "Young people in this industry, like others, have a passion for sustainability," says Mark Watson, senior assistant vice-president and group director, sustainability and impact, at Banyan Group. "They want to work for businesses that are socially responsible, that have a great track record of environmental performance and that take sustainability seriously. We need to make sure that we capitalise on that enthusiasm but also ensure that we continue to deliver."

Helping employers reduce their own carbon footprints can provide such opportunities. This is an everyday focus of Ms Park's work in food and beverage operations. "We are combining plastic with recycled materials to reduce carbon footprint and powering our restaurants with solar energy," she says. "We're also using technology that converts food waste to water, one effect of which is to reduce the amount of carbon emitted in transporting hotel waste."

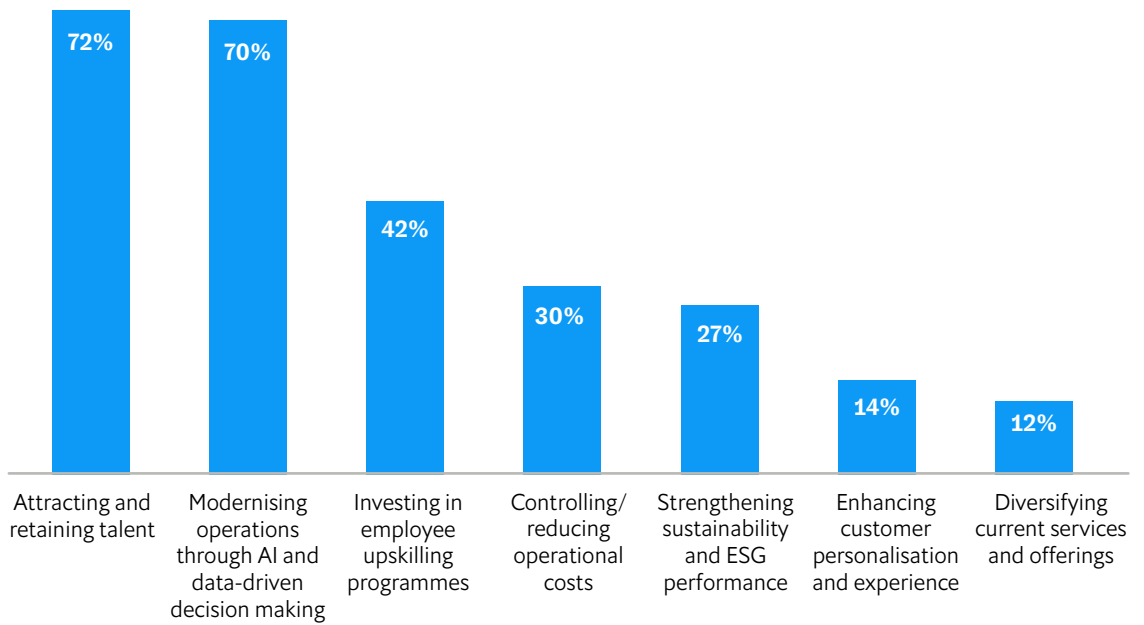
Mr Watson also believes there will be opportunities in areas like climate-risk modelling. "The ability to quantify climate risk is going to be critical to businesses like ours in the years to come," he says. "Demand for such skills is likely to grow," he adds. Young talent in our survey rate sustainability and ESG-related skills highly for their potential to contribute to career success. But nearly half (46%) say they lack these skills (Figure 5), and almost as many executives (42%) agree. That view is supported in a recent study by the Pacific Asia Travel Association into the region's tourism workforce, which points to considerable skill shortages in areas such as digital literacy and sustainable practices.<sup>20</sup>

## Potential for disillusionment

Most executives (74%) may agree that sustainability and ESG expectations will heavily impact their businesses in the coming years, but far fewer (27%) say strengthening performance in those areas is a strategic priority.

**Figure 6: Where sustainability sits among organisations’ strategic priorities**

*Top strategic priorities for leadership teams over the next two to three years (executives only)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

Companies that do not prioritise sustainability may struggle to recruit and retain young professionals. “A lot of students are deciding on job offers based on sustainability,” says Mrs Marion. “They want to know, and have the ability to find out, if a potential employer is actually taking actions to be sustainable or if it’s just talking about it because everyone expects such action today.” Our young talent clearly question the sector’s sustainability efforts to date: 83% have seen only limited efforts by organisations to reduce their environmental impact. “There are many companies in this industry that do sustainability with purpose,” says Ms Liyanapathirana. “The problem is there are too many that do not.”

The responses of most executives seem to indicate that young people’s scepticism is justified. Nearly eight in ten (79%) say their organisation contributes less than it should to environmental sustainability. A majority also recognise generational differences in motivation, with 82% of young professionals and 76% of managers stating that younger employees are more driven by sustainability than their older counterparts.

### Engaging young talent for the greater good

According to Mr Watson, young employees will work out fairly quickly how serious an organisation is about sustainability. Therefore, he believes, it is important for employers to incentivise them to make their own contributions to sustainable development at all levels.

“We aim to give young people a host of opportunities to support our sustainability efforts,” says Mr Watson. “They include things like participating in beach clean-ups or similar volunteering initiatives, but we’re also encouraging them to do more, such as becoming sustainability champions in their properties.”

In 2010 Banyan Group introduced Greater Good Grants, which support locally-driven projects that benefit the environment and community, as another means of building young employees’ engagement in sustainability. “Our associates bid for the company’s financial support for local projects they’re involved in,” explains Mr Watson. “We evaluate the bids, funds are allocated and then projects happen. That helps give our people belief that they’re making a difference, that with our help they’re seeing change in their community.”



# New experiences

Other career and business opportunities exist in the growth of sustainable tourism. Community-based tourism (CBT), which engages local communities in planning and managing tourism, helping to preserve culture and nature while generating income, is growing strongly in parts of Asia.<sup>21</sup> Regenerative tourism, which encourages travellers to choose stays in places that proactively seek to restore natural ecosystems, is also taking root.<sup>22</sup>

Examples of experiential tourism include culinary tourism (like sampling street food in Penang<sup>23</sup> or sushi in Tokyo<sup>24</sup>); film and pop-culture tourism (such as visiting the locations where Korean dramas are filmed<sup>25</sup> or Japan's Studio Ghibli park<sup>26</sup>); and adventure tourism (like scuba diving in the Philippines<sup>27</sup>). Wellness tourism is also gaining momentum; examples include spa retreats, yoga and meditation getaways, Ayurvedic and traditional medicine experiences and general health-oriented holidays.

One-fifth of the young talent we surveyed believe experiential tourism will have a significant impact on APAC's hospitality and tourism sector over the next three years. Fewer executives (13%) hold this view, but nearly half of those (45%) are currently piloting trials of such services. "People are no longer coming to hotels just for the food and accommodation," says Ms Liyanapathirana. "Now they want personalised experiences. I've seen so many guests with a huge interest in cultural tourism and wellness tourism, for example."

Indeed, personalisation is integral to such experiences. "At our wellness retreats, we take guests' preferences and their health profiles," adds Ms Liyanapathirana. "We design wellness packages for each of them and tailor menus to them." Mr Newmark agrees that personalisation has become much more important: "Early career talent brings fresh ideas shaped by their own interests and values, like design, tech and sustainability, which help us create more personalised and relevant experiences for the next generation of travellers."



Over half (55%) of our young talent are optimistic that experiential tourism will have a positive impact on jobs in the sector, while around one in ten (12%) are excited about the meaningful opportunities it could create. New roles that may emerge in the latter area include storytelling, itinerary design and cultural facilitation. Demand is also likely to increase for experience and wellness co-ordinators.<sup>28,29</sup>

Such roles, like many others in hospitality and tourism, put a premium on soft skills such as emotional intelligence and empathy. These qualities sit atop the executives' list of "must-have" skills to succeed in the sector (cited by 67%), above even adaptability and problem-solving. The younger respondents also place it near the top of their "must-have" list (cited by 61%), a close second to digital skills (Figure 5).

Most young talent believe that they have the requisite emotional intelligence and empathy (Figure 5). Executives also believe the same about their own workforce—just 21% deem these skills to be lacking in their employees. Altogether this suggests that today's young hospitality and tourism talent have much to gain from the continued growth of new business models. And that they have much to offer hospitality and tourism businesses that seek to develop these.

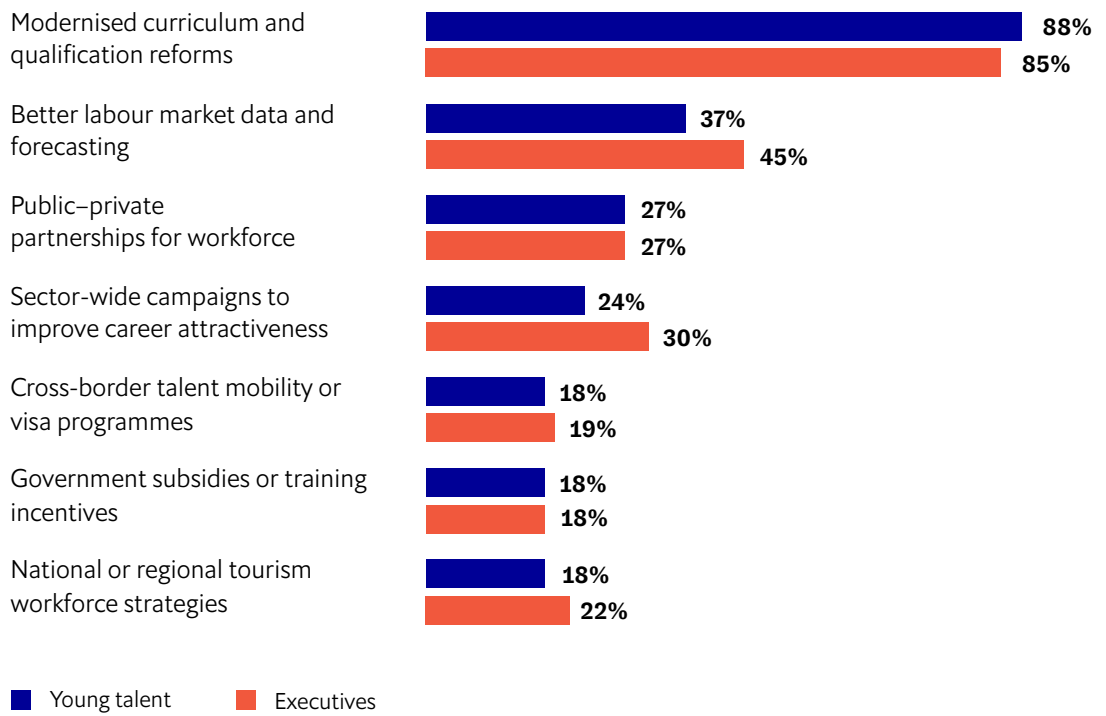
Their existing skills and enthusiasm for learning new ones bode well for the industry. But the sector needs a larger pool of such talent. Young professionals (88%) and managers (85%) believe this requires system-wide reform of training in hospitality and tourism. This will take time, cautions Mrs Marion: "Reforming curricula can be an arduous process and not something that happens often, usually only on a five-year cycle. Education typically moves slower than industry."

To help build a future-ready industry workforce, managers also cite the need for better labour-market data and forecasting (45%, versus 37% of youth). Around 27% of respondents in both groups support public-private partnerships and campaigns to improve the sector's appeal. Smaller numbers favour cross-border talent mobility or visa programmes, training incentives and workforce plans. Much now depends on whether industry stakeholders act on these signals.



**Figure 7: Shaping tomorrow's workforce**

*Top interventions for building a future-ready workforce in APAC  
(% of young talent and executive respondents)*



Source: Economist Impact, 2025

# Conclusion

Hospitality and tourism businesses in APAC concerned about whether they will have the workforce they need to grow should take some heart from our research. The sector's existing young talent, and those seeking to join it, are highly motivated about the career they've chosen and optimistic about what the sector has to offer them.

They're clear about what will do most to keep them committed to their organisation. Remuneration is always a consideration but nothing comes close in importance as career development opportunities and skill-building. Organisations that prioritise these will improve their chances of securing and retaining the young talent they'll need to support business growth in the years to come.

Our research points to specific ways hospitality and tourism firms can reach that goal.

**Widen the scope of digital training.** Even tech-savvy recruits may be new to workplace digital systems and could benefit from training. Development programmes can include AI basics and hands-on practice with the digital tools they will use day to day.

**Involve young talent in practical sustainability work.** Teams can go beyond communicating commitments by inviting young staff to contribute to projects, such as energy or waste reduction, where they could see and measure early results.

**Tap into young people's skills to develop new models.** Young talent's passion for guest interaction and service fits well with experiential tourism models such as wellness travel and cultural tourism. Organisations could also establish collaborative forums involving young staff and more senior managers to brainstorm ideas for new service development.

**Accelerate educational reform in partnership with industry.** Education providers and employers can collaborate and align on new training content that incorporates AI, sustainability and experiential service design. This could better match the pace of industry change and respond to young people's call for qualifications that feel relevant across APAC markets.

**Embed a youth voice in decision-making.** Industry associations could set up youth councils and listening sessions. Firms could involve junior staff in service-standard reviews and fund small idea sprints to test proposals.

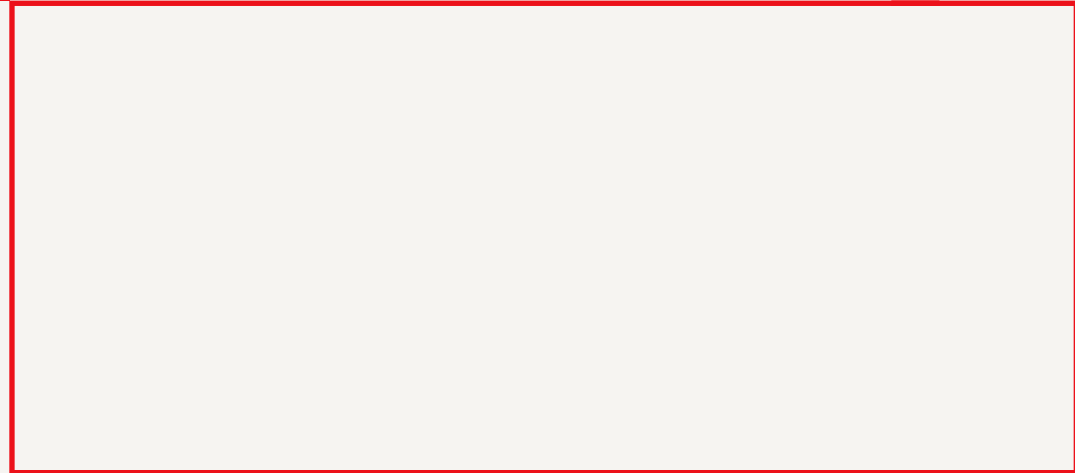
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