

# THE GREAT BRITISH SPEAKING GAP

DECEMBER 2025





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# FOREWORD BY **SOPHIE SMITH**

CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, COMPASS GROUP UK & IRELAND

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Britain loves to talk. From sports to politics to the weather, conversation is ingrained in our culture.

Yet, when applied to the work setting, cracks begin to appear.

The term “oracy” – the ability to articulate ideas effectively – was coined many decades ago, but has only recently entered the mainstream discourse.

Oracy skills now play a critical role in society and increasingly, business. From front-of-house customer service to boardroom presentations and even the ability to deliver and receive feedback from colleagues. Oracy is a fundamental skill to succeed in the workplace, enhancing individual career progression and ultimately improving business performance.

It seems obvious that access to oracy education and training should be available to all. It is as important as reading, writing and arithmetic – skills which are taught at a young age to set children up for success in life.

Unfortunately, there are clear disparities when it comes to oracy. This is compounding the challenge many people face – something that we care deeply about at Compass Group UK & Ireland and want to overcome.

That is why we conducted polling with More in Common and commissioned research with Purpose Union to better understand perceptions and access to oracy education and training in the UK. And the results are stark. Nearly every respondent said they think oracy is important

for career progression, but a majority have never had any oracy education or training. And this access only worsens when you take into account socio-economic backgrounds.

While we are starting to see some green shoots of progress, as our research found that younger respondents are most likely to have had oracy opportunities at school or relevant training in the workplace – we need to go further and do better to ensure these opportunities are available to all.

As part of Our Social Promise, Compass is creating support for our colleagues, local communities and wider society; and improving oracy skills is one of the ways we want to achieve this. We know it’s good for career growth, it’s good for business and it helps to provide equal opportunities in the workplace.

In this report, we will make the business case for investing in oracy. We will shine a light on where there are gaps, but equally highlight the positive stories from people who have gone on to succeed thanks to the right level of access.

Lastly, we provide a series of recommendations for the government, as well as for our partners and the wider business community, on how oracy training can be embedded in organisations to improve social mobility. We believe that by adopting these simple steps, it is possible to positively change the lives of many people.



# METHODOLOGY

More in Common polled 2,106 people between 5 and 8 September 2025.

Data has been weighted to be nationally representative of the UK population.



# CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

Compass Group UK & Ireland launched its flagship initiative “Our Social Promise” in 2021 to drive social mobility and create positive socioeconomic impact both within and beyond the organisation. The programme’s core mission is to enhance employment opportunities and transform a million lives through job creation, education, training, and community engagement, by 2030.

Since its inception, it has supported over 500,000 people, demonstrating significant progress through initiatives such as Xcelerate our regional skills hub, the Social Partner Hub – supporting long term unemployed and disabled people into work, apprenticeship schemes, Junior Chef Academies, and wellbeing workshops for young people and families. The initiative also includes supported internships for young adults with learning disabilities or autism

spectrum conditions. Building on these successes, in 2025 Compass announced its “Mission to a Million: Forward Together,” programme, which is structured around four pillars:

## GET IN

Expanding access to opportunities via apprenticeships and partnerships with schools, charities, and communities.

## GET ON

Focusing on skills development, leadership training, and mentoring to help colleagues advance their careers.

## GET SUPPORTED

Advocating for fair pay and providing comprehensive employee assistance, including wellbeing and mental health support.

## GET INVOLVED

Empowering employees to volunteer and promote health, nutrition, and sustainability in local communities.

The overarching goal is to embed socio-economic outcomes into all programmes, leveraging Compass’s scale to support tens of thousands annually through learning, upskilling, and community initiatives.

### ABOUT COMPASS GROUP UK & IRELAND

The UK’s leading food and support services provider. Made up of 55,000 people, working across 5,000 + locations throughout the country, providing great food and support services to workers, school children, hospital patients, military personnel and visitors to the nation’s major sports and cultural events.





# DEFINITION OF ORACY

Oracy as a concept is still in its infancy and there is no agreed definition of it in education or in the workplace. For the purpose of this report, we have aligned our definition of oracy in the workplace with the Oracy Education Commission.<sup>1</sup>

When conducting our polling, we provided respondents with the following definition of oracy to ensure accuracy in responses:

**Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication**

<sup>1</sup> Oracy Education Commission, We Need to Talk (2024)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Britons overwhelmingly believe oracy skills are important for career progression and leadership. Yet the majority of Britons have had no dedicated teaching (53%) or workplace training (64%).
- Professions that are least likely to have had training at work to improve oracy skills include casual workers (20%), semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers (19%) and people in supervisory or clerical and junior managerial roles (24%).
- People from higher socio-economic backgrounds are 5 times more likely to have had some form of oracy training or development opportunities.
- There is also a gender gap. Men are more likely than women to have had public speaking training (45% vs 39% of women) and to have received oracy development opportunities at school (39% vs 33%).
- Access is improving. People between the ages of 18-24 and 25-34 are much more likely to have had some form of oracy education or training than preceding generations.
- Respondents expressed a preference for dedicated training programmes over workshops on active listening and opportunities for public speaking or presentations (36% vs 29% and 19% respectively), as a way of improving oracy skills.
- We recommend a series of changes to government policy and for employers to consider in order to improve access to oracy, creating a competitive business edge and a fairer workplace. These range from pushing for oracy to be embedded into apprenticeships and T Levels to make sure it is a core competency across technical and vocational training pathways, to government providing practical resources to employers for HR professionals and managers.





# WHAT THE DATA SHOWS: THE GREAT BRITISH SPEAKING GAP

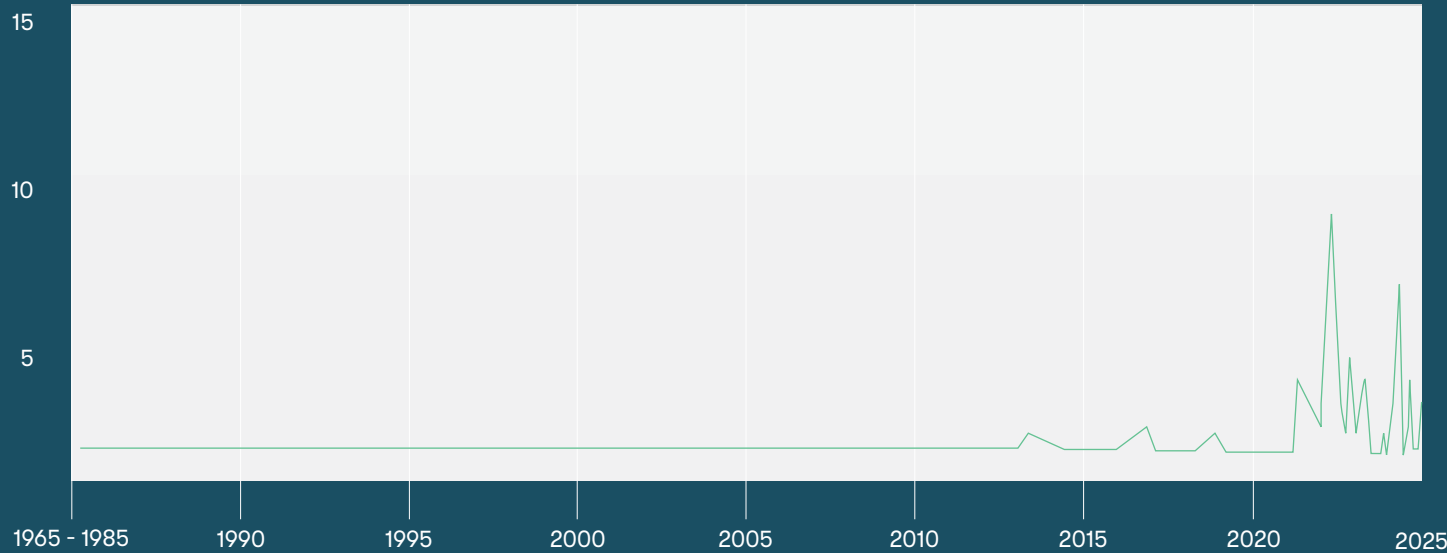
## THE EVOLUTION OF ORACY

While this report focuses on the role of oracy in the workplace, we think it’s important to understand the context which has enabled the speaking gap to exist in today’s world.

Oracy is by no means a new concept. In fact, the term was first coined by academics in the 1960s in an attempt to put oracy skills on par

with literacy skills.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, mentions of oracy in public discourse were far and few between until recently. Analysis of Hansard data highlights that oracy as a concept was rarely mentioned in Parliament until the last few years.

MENTIONS OF ORACY IN UK PARLIAMENT



Source: Hansard

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wilkinson, The Concept of Oracy (1965)

## THE POLICY LANDSCAPE

In 2023, now Prime Minister Keir Starmer pledged to weave oracy through a new national curriculum, giving the concept a new impetus. Groups such as Voice21, the National Literacy Trust and the English Speaking Union were emboldened on their campaigns for better oracy education across schools.

Campaigners predominantly focus on addressing imbalances in the education system. As oracy is not an official curriculum subject, it is down to individual schools to provide verbal communication lessons or opportunities – such as debate clubs.

These campaigners argue opportunities should be accessible to every student across the UK. Our research found that over half of Britons (53%) had no dedicated teaching on oracy skills at school. Those who went to private schools are much more likely to say there was some or a lot of teaching or emphasis on these skills (59% compared to 32% of those who went to state schools) – which shows that more must be done to improve access for all.

In November 2025, the government set out plans to update the curriculum to give young people the skills for life and work. Within the promised reforms are plans to publish a new oracy framework to ensure more young people become confident and effective speakers. While this is a welcome move, it will take time for the workplace to reap the benefits of this framework and we strongly believe that business can help to address this gap in the meantime.

Very little has been done to advocate for more oracy training in the workplace. We found that over two thirds (68%) of Britons think it is important for businesses to help improve oracy skills. That's why businesses must lead this change rather than relying on the government or schools.

While the education system is intrinsically linked to the world of work, the purpose of schooling is not to solely prepare young people to enter business. The onus should be on the employer to train people so they are set up for success – whether that is in front of house roles or managerial positions.

It is also vital to recognise that individuals develop at different stages, and that learning continues beyond and outside of school. Most people will spend many more years in work than in school, giving employers greater opportunities to support them to further develop their oracy skills so that they can thrive.

Furthermore, by improving access to oracy training, employers are not only encouraging individual growth and development, but crucially also enhancing company performance and bringing benefits to the business with a socially mobile workforce.



## WORKPLACE ORACY

We wanted to dive deeper into the data to better understand access to oracy training opportunities within the workplace in the UK. And the results are decisive. An overwhelming majority of Britons (87%) believe that strong oracy skills are important for career progression and leadership. Despite this, nearly two thirds (64%) have not had any training from current or previous employers on these skills. Unsurprisingly, those who have had training are likely to be in higher managerial roles – just over half (51%) said they have had some training.

Professions that are least likely to have had training at work to improve oracy skills include casual workers (20%), semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers (19%) and people in supervisory or clerical and junior managerial roles (24%).

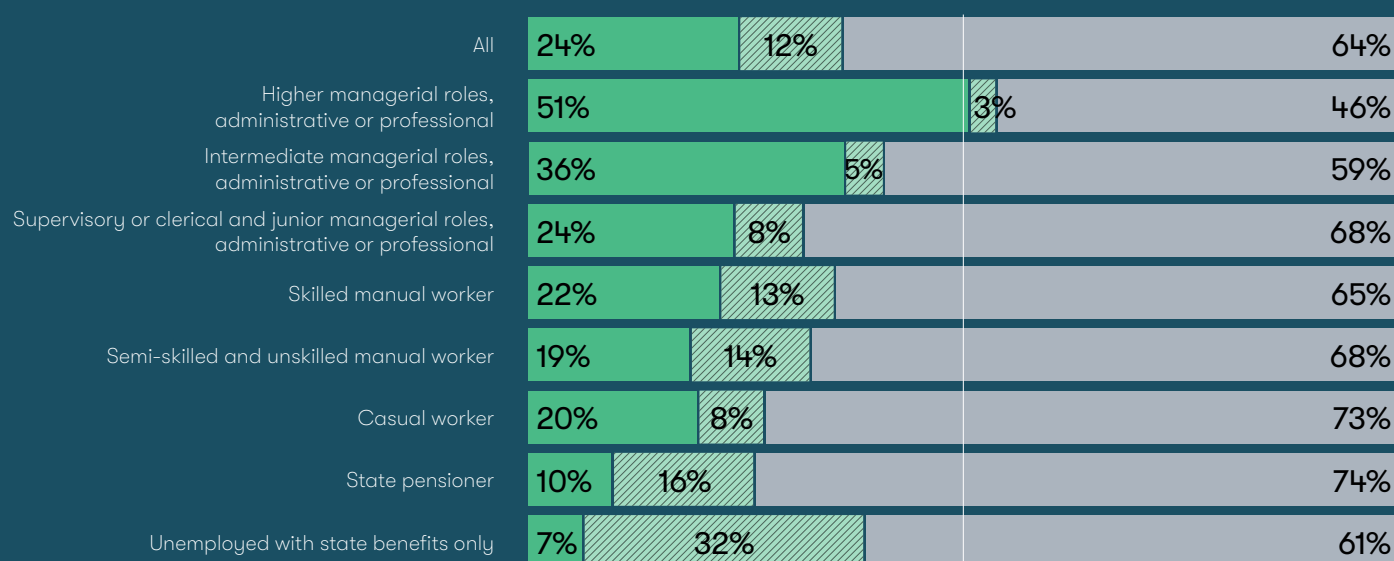
**Two thirds (64%) have not had any training from current or previous employers on these skills**





## MANAGERS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO HAVE HAD SOME TRAINING AT WORK TO IMPROVE THEIR ORACY SKILLS

Has your current or previous employer provided any training or development opportunities specifically focused on improving communication or oracy skills?



■ YES
 ■ DON'T KNOW
 ■ NO

More in Common • September 2025

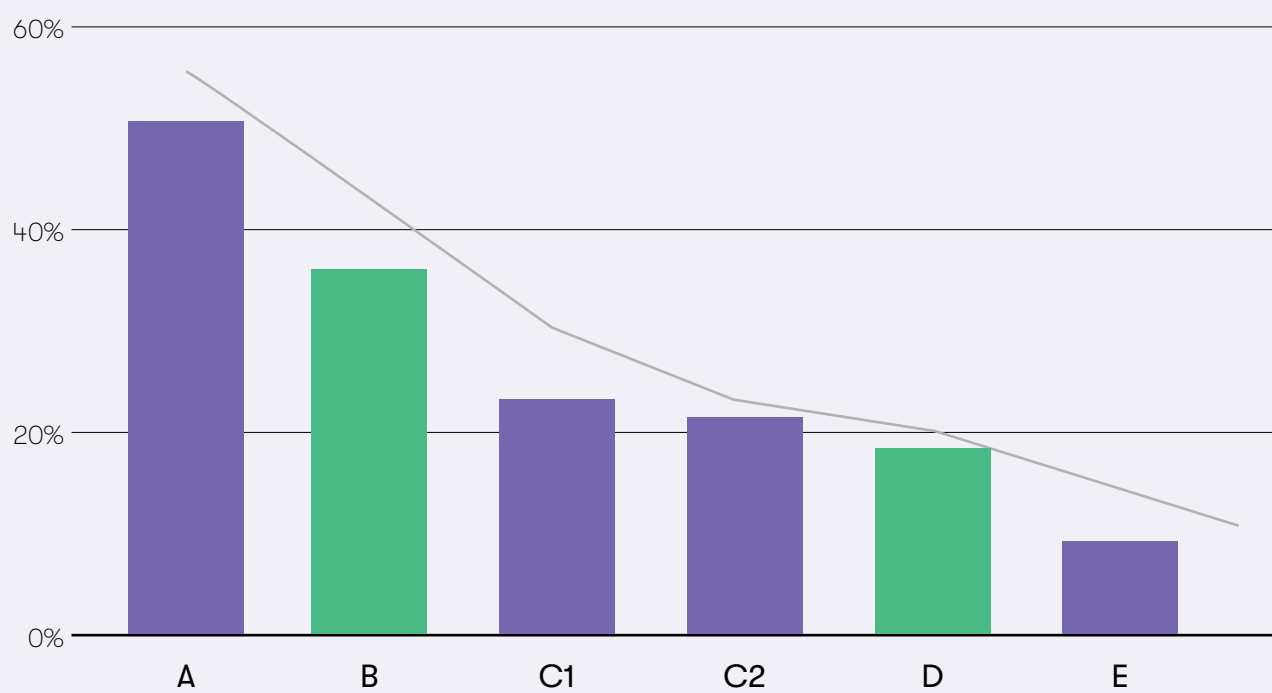
The social grade classification system used in this report is based on occupation and was developed for use on the NRS. Although people are described as “semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers”, it is important to highlight that these categories do not wholly reflect the range of actual skills needed to do jobs that are delineated by these categories. However, the NRS remains the most widely used source of social grade data and hence has been used for this report.

# TALKING CLASS

When examining the data more closely, it is evident that socio-economic status significantly impacts oracy skills. From confidence in expressing oneself to opportunities for learning critical oracy skills, there is a clear gap between the most and least privileged individuals. The lack of oracy skills limits career progression for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, which leads to less diverse and more privileged leadership teams.

When looking at social grades\* (A, B, C1, C2, D, E) of individuals who have accessed opportunities for oracy development at school and in the workplace, there is a clear downward trend. Nearly two thirds (64%) of individuals from the most well off backgrounds had either dedicated teaching or a significant emphasis on oracy skills at school, compared with less than one quarter (23%) of people from the least advantaged backgrounds.

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE HAD WORKPLACE ORACY TRAINING AND THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND



\*Social grades is a classification based on someone’s occupation. This is decided through a variety of factors, including the occupation of the Chief Income Earner, as well as their qualifications and the number of people they are responsible for. <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>

This trend is mirrored in the workplace. When asked if current or previous employers have provided any training or development opportunities on improving communication or oracy skills, just over half (51%) of people from social grade A backgrounds said yes, compared to just one in ten (10%) of people from social grade E backgrounds.

The data tells us two things. The first is that there is not a consistent level of teaching or training of verbal communication skills in the UK across all groups. Second, is that you are much less likely to have that opportunity if you are from a lower socio-economic background. This can have a profound impact on social mobility in the workplace, ultimately creating what sociologists Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison call the “class ceiling”.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Sam Friedman & Daniel Laurison, *The Class Ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged* (2019)

## THE GENDER SPEAKING GAP

As well as socio-economic differences, gender differences were also apparent in the data. The gender speaking gap, where men are more comfortable speaking in public than women, creates an imbalance which reinforces existing biases and perpetuates skill disparities. The lack of oracy skills and training can affect women's confidence and sense of empowerment, and impact their visibility and influence, therefore limiting their career progression. This leads to a less diverse range of voices and perspectives in decision-making and leadership roles, creating a vicious cycle which further widens the gender equity gap in the workplace.

Improving gender equity has been a long standing focus for many businesses in the UK. Our research found that more men have had access to oracy skills development opportunities in education (39% vs 33% of women) or workplace training (26% vs 23% of women). Perhaps unsurprisingly, men are also more likely to feel that expressing themselves comes naturally (20% vs 15% of women).

## MEN & WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

### Had oracy development opportunities at school



### Workplace training



### Expressing themselves naturally



MEN ■ WOMEN ■



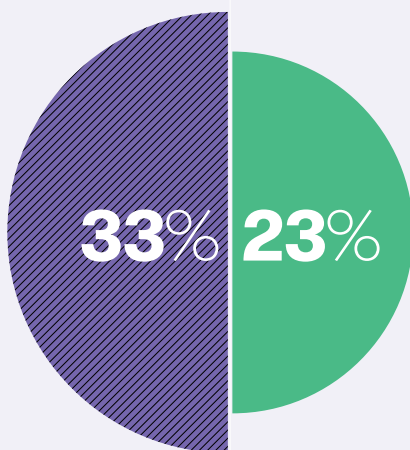
However, our research shows that there is a gender divide in the specific support people are looking for when developing their oracy skills and the types of training they have received. Women are much more likely to want to focus on active listening than men (33% vs 23%). On the other hand, men are much more likely to want a focus on public speaking opportunities (24% to 15% of women).

This desired focus aligns with the types of training that men and women have both accessed. More men say they have had public

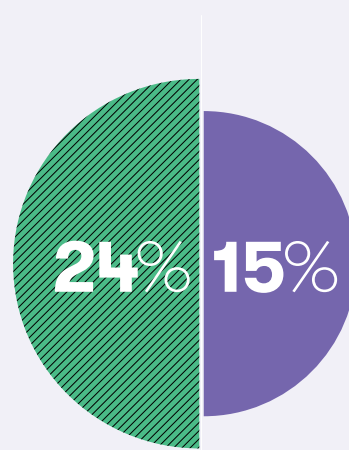
speaking training than women (45% vs 39% of women), while more women say they have had active listening training (54% vs 43% of men).

Employers need to address this gap by ensuring equal access to training and opportunities for men and women, and creating an inclusive workplace where all voices are heard and valued.

## MEN AND WOMEN HAVE DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THE MOST BENEFICIAL TYPE OF ORACY TRAINING



Women are much more likely to want to focus on active listening than men



Men are much more likely to want a focus on public speaking opportunities

MEN ■ WOMEN ■

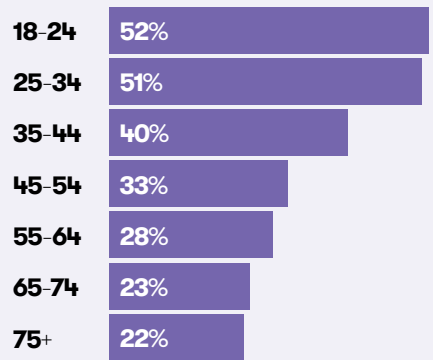
# BRITAIN’S VOICE IS GETTING LOUDER

While our research shows that oracy has been overlooked in both education and the workplace, there are signs which suggest this is now changing.

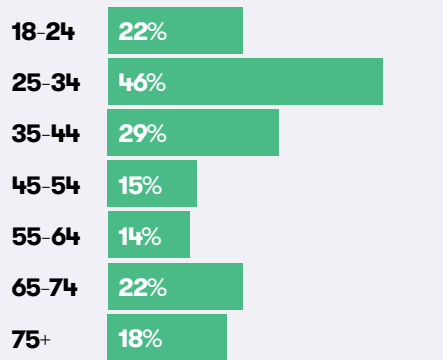
Older Britons are much less likely to have accessed oracy opportunities than the youngest generations. When it comes to education, less than a quarter of people between the ages of 65-74 and 75+ say they had an emphasis on oracy at school (23% and 22% respectively). This compares to over half of 18-24 and 25-34 year olds who have had these opportunities (52% and 51% respectively).

This trend is somewhat mirrored in the workplace. By far the most likely age group to have accessed oracy training are 25-34 year olds (46%), 17% more than their preceding age group (29% of 35-44 year olds). These age groups are much more likely to be at the point in their career where they are entering middle management and senior management positions, indicating that verbal communication is becoming a more important factor in their career development.

ORACY EDUCATION EMPHASIS  
BY AGE GROUP



ORACY WORKPLACE TRAINING  
BY AGE GROUP



## ORACY IN AN EVOLVING WORKPLACE

Workplaces are changing rapidly and that is only increasing the need for better, clearer communications skills. From the growth of hybrid working to generative AI, the workplace has evolved exponentially. Technology has had a profound impact on the food and services industry, creating faster, more seamless services but also resulting in positive human interaction becoming a more vital part of the customer experience.

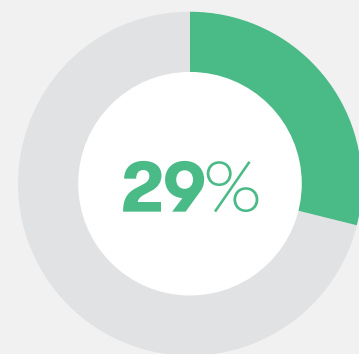
There are varying degrees of comfort when it comes to speaking in the workplace. Britons feel most confident making small talk at work than any other kind of conversation. Two fifths (40%) feel very confident in these types of conversations – such as about the weather or weekend plans. Comparatively, fewer people feel very confident making constructive criticism in the workplace (22%), having internal debates and discussions about decision making (26%), and presenting to customers or clients (29%).

When asked about what type of support oracy in an evolving workplace or initiatives would be most beneficial for businesses, dedicated training programmes were a more popular option than workshops or training on active listening, and opportunities for public speaking or presentations (36% vs 29% and 19% respectively).

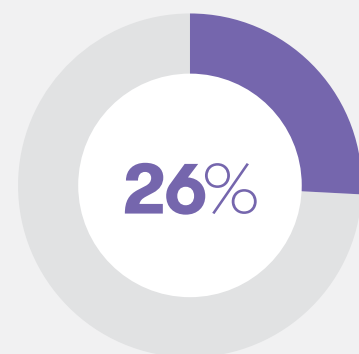
### HOW CONFIDENT ARE PEOPLE EXPRESSING THEIR THOUGHTS TO OTHERS AT WORK?



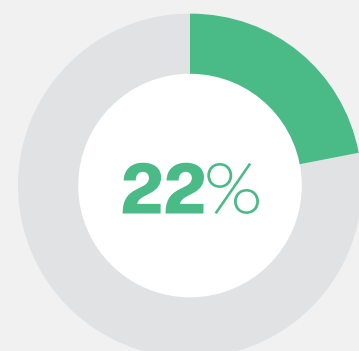
in small talk conversations



presenting to customers or clients



having internal debates and discussions about decision making

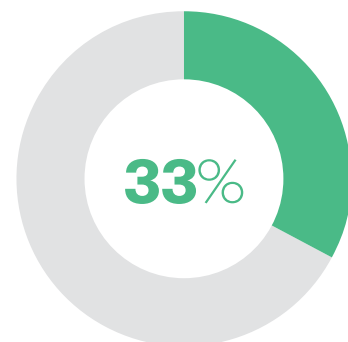


making constructive criticism in the workplace



We recognise that neurodiversity in the workplace is increasing, and that employees may have a range of communication and processing styles. In recommending that oracy be established as a core competency, we have considered these differences and the potential challenges they may present, such as anxiety in spontaneous speaking or difficulty with rapid verbal processing. Our approach aims to ensure all employees are supported to develop strong communication skills and contribute confidently.

The growth of generative AI has also added a new impetus to improve verbal communication in the workplace. Research last year found that 68% of business leaders agreed that the growth of technology and AI will make spoken language and listening skills more important for progression at work.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, our polling found Britons are split on whether the technology will make a difference to the importance of oracy in their job, with a third (33%) saying it will make no difference at all. This potentially indicates there is a gap in expectations between perceptions of business leaders and the general public when it comes to the emergence of AI.



**of Brits say AI will make no difference to the importance of oracy in their work**

<sup>4</sup> Oracy Education Commission, Parents and employers united in demand for more focus on speaking skills in school 2024



# WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Our polling highlights a clear disparity in terms of access to oracy opportunities within the workplace. This particularly affects people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and women.

Social mobility is good for business. According to the 2021 census, just 23.3% of the population in England and Wales were classed with an AB background. People from those social grades are much more likely to have accessed oracy development opportunities. Progress has been made to improve gender representation in boardrooms – around 35.3% of FTSE 350 senior leadership roles are held by women but more still needs to be done to advance gender equity in the workplace.

It is vital to address these gaps. Ensuring that people from different backgrounds have had the same opportunity helps to demonstrate meritocracy in hiring, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to succeed. It provides a competitive edge. Diverse teams are able to innovate effectively and better market themselves to a wide range of audiences.

And for industries such as the hospitality sector, communication skills are essential for health and safety reasons when it comes to activities such as the preparation of food. Furthermore, feeling comfortable to talk about work and wellness can help improve productivity, employee wellbeing, and improve staff retention. And as the world of work continues to debate how robots can help humans, we should equally be focusing on the skills which generative AI cannot replicate.

The ultimate business case for oracy though is this: improving verbal communication skills is low risk, high reward. It does not need to be a costly and time consuming activity - we will share later in our recommendations how oracy training can be done effectively using an organisation's own resources. It improves performance, prepares colleagues for leadership roles and leads to better service for customers.



# COMPASS ORACY TRAINING IN ACTION



## JOANNE PINKSTONE

Deputy General Manager, Lodestone House  
(soon transferring to New Talent Development Business Partner)

*"I have worked at Compass for 15 years, I came in as an Event Manager within the Lodestone House sector, working within one of our Independent Schools. I went to a state school and didn't go to university, but within Compass I have climbed the career ladder and had opportunities unlocked to progress.*

*A turning point for me was taking on the CIPD L3 Career Pathway that took almost two years. Part of this was a course on presentation skills. The first presentation I did, I chose a topic that I could talk about easily – Sourdough Bread! That helped me gain confidence talking in front of people and we then went on to do several presentations on different subjects and getting feedback and support throughout. It has taken a lot for me to overcome the challenge of presenting and I now do feel much more confident talking to clients, colleagues, new candidates and presenting.*

*Another skill that came through my programme was learning to communicate with different people in different ways, by thinking about their personality profile and the way they like to get information to process and understand it. This is a real skill and developing it has undoubtedly supported my career progression and confidence – I am about to take on a completely new role within the Talent team.*

*I feel really strongly that oracy skills are crucial to personal and working life. I work with a lot of young people, who often don't have the skills to speak on the phone or have conversations around feedback, criticism or interviews for example. I really think that by supporting people throughout their careers, we can help them to develop communications skills that will provide them with the tools they need to progress in so many ways. This is something I am now really hoping I can bring to life through my new role and experience within Compass."*



## **ABUL KAAZIM**

Recently completed Compass' Grad scheme  
Vendor Assurance Technologist

*“When I joined the Compass Grad programme after university, it was my first step into a professional career. I didn't have any experience of a workplace, and I was not confident about speaking to people in this new environment. Despite having been to university, no oracy skills were explicitly taught – it was more that we just did presentations and the feedback was all about the content.*

*The Grad scheme I took on was operational and I realised very quickly I needed to be able to talk to people, communicate my ideas and understand theirs. This was something that I really struggled with at first and I wanted to become more confident and clearly articulate my views.*

*During the programme, we started to talk about presentation skills and developed the tools to have and deal with difficult conversations. I was always so worried about what people were thinking of me and what the consequences would be to having different views. I now realise that it's good to have different opinions, healthy debate and diverse insights.*

*These skills have been a total game-changer for me. Having recently completed the Grad programme, I am now taking on my new role within Vendor Assurance. There is no doubt that further progress on oracy skills will be key to my future, but I now have a good foundation to build on.”*









## BRANDON SAGE

Skills and Early Careers Administrator

*"I joined Compass via the Kickstart programme and I am now undertaking my third apprenticeship since joining. Throughout school and afterwards, I had no confidence. These programmes have helped me to grow and believe in myself - beyond recognition.*

*When I first started here, a big part of my role was talking to candidates on the phone and it was a really big deal for me. As part of my training, my manager had to hone this skill. We would practice calls, go through scripts and think ahead about how to deal with queries. At first, she would sit with me and we'd go through feedback after each call, until I progressed to being able to feel like I was ready to try it alone. For me this took a lot of practice and*

*my communication skills in this area improved so much by me pushing myself to make these calls and take on constructive ideas on how to get better at it. Another area of oracy that I have enhanced during my time here is presentation skills, which has played a role in my apprenticeships.*

*There is no doubt in my mind that oracy skills are critical in working life - team communication, talking to candidates, dealing with problems when they crop up, but also having a voice to speak out about any support I need. In my time at Compass, learning to talk to people and tailor these skills to the environment I am in has been invaluable."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR GOVERNMENT

- **Expand the focus on oracy beyond schools.**  
Extend the government's current emphasis on oracy in education to include the workplace, with sustained investment in research to assess the national impact of workplace oracy interventions on employability, productivity and economic growth.
- **Provide practical resources for employers.**  
Work with business groups to develop guidance and toolkits for HR and managers on integrating oracy into staff development, including maintaining a list of accredited high-quality oracy training providers.
- **Appoint a workplace oracy champion.**  
Appoint a national advocate to promote the value of oracy in the workplace, encourage employers to invest in staff development, and liaise with the Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Business and Trade to coordinate ongoing support for employers.

## FOR EMPLOYERS

- **Guarantee at least one oracy training opportunity for every employee.** Ensure all staff have the chance to develop their communication skills, with government support available for SMEs to meet this commitment. Ensure that access to such training is fair and track which groups are participating in training at different rates to others.
- **Embed oracy into apprenticeships and T Levels.** Make oracy a core competency across technical and vocational training pathways.
- **Support programmes in deprived areas.** As part of pipeline development and community engagement strategies, invest in initiatives that provide people from disadvantaged communities with early access to oracy opportunities they may otherwise miss in the school system.

# SUPPORT FROM INDUSTRY LEADERS



## HIT TRAINING

*“In today’s fast-paced hospitality sector, clear and confident communication isn’t a soft skill—it’s business-critical. As young people move from the classroom into apprenticeships, the oracy foundations built in school must be strengthened to meet the demands of real-world service environments.*

*Across the UK, schools are prioritising oracy to help learners articulate ideas, listen actively and engage in meaningful dialogue. At HIT Training, we build on these essential skills through programmes designed to deepen communication capability in line with employer needs.*

*Speaking and listening sit at the heart of every hospitality role. From a Commis Chef coordinating with their brigade to a Supervisor leading a team briefing, effective verbal communication underpins operational success. That’s why our Functional Skills English programmes are fully integrated into each apprenticeship standard - helping learners not just retain their oracy skills, but apply them confidently in context.”*

**MICAELA BARLOW FIH**

**QUALITY AND CURRICULUM DIRECTOR -  
NATIONAL – HIT TRAINING**



## UKHOSPITALITY

*"Communication in a hospitality venue is an essential skill. Whether it's communicating in a busy kitchen team or providing fantastic front-of-house service, oracy skills are a must. We support Compass' calls to expand the focus on oracy to include the workplace, and give both teams and employers the tools they need to develop our skills even further."*

**KATE NICHOLLS**

CHAIR OF UKHOSPITALITY



## FUTURES FOR ALL

*"This report shines a light on an issue at the heart of social mobility. Oracy is not a soft skill; it is a gateway to confidence, opportunity and progression. Too many young people are held back simply because they haven't had the chance to develop these skills, and the consequences follow them into the workplace."*

*At Futures for All, we see every day how powerful it is when young people are given the space to speak, listen and lead — it transforms their sense of what's possible. Employers have a vital role to play in making that a reality. By investing in skills such as oracy, businesses unlock potential, strengthen teams and create fairer pathways into work. Our evidence shows that high-quality work experience is one of the most effective ways to build these skills, giving young people the confidence and real-world practice they need to thrive.*

*We welcome Compass's focus on this critical skill and are grateful for their leadership in bringing much-needed attention to an issue that affects opportunity, equity and ultimately the future strength of our workforce."*

**NICK BROOK**

CEO, FUTURES FOR ALL