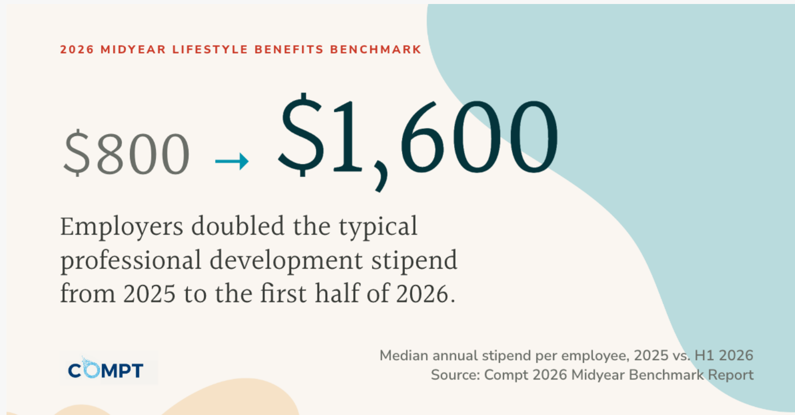
Professional Development Budgets Double in 2026 as AI Reshapes Employee Learning

BOSTON, MA, UNITED STATES, August 19, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Employers doubled the typical employee learning budget in the first half of 2026, and a growing share of that money is going toward AI. Nearly one in five dollars spent through flexible professional development stipends went to AI-related tools and training.



Employers doubled typical professional development stipends year over year

The findings come from Compt's 2026 Midyear Lifestyle Benefits Benchmark Report, released today and based on Compt customer reimbursement data from January to June 2026 across industries, company sizes, and geographies.

The median professional development stipend rose from $800 to $1,600 per employee year over year, while the share of employers offering one increased from 20% to 25%, the largest gain among major benefit categories. AI-related tools and training accounted for 18% of spending within flexible professional development stipends, compared with 11% of spending within structured programs such as tuition reimbursement.

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Amy Spurling

“No matter what the market is doing, companies keep investing in their people. What changes is where that investment goes,” said Amy Spurling, Founder and CEO of Compt. “During COVID, wellness and mental health moved to the forefront. Now we’re seeing professional development come roaring back, with AI education driving a lot of that demand.”

AI spending moves beyond traditional courses. Employees are using professional development stipends for tools and training that were barely visible in the data a year ago, including Claude Code, Model Context Protocol training, agent-builder courses, and prompt engineering.

The spending reflects how quickly employee learning needs can change as new technologies move into the workplace, particularly when employees have flexibility to choose the tools and education most relevant to their work.

Flexible LSAs keep gaining ground. Employers are also consolidating lifestyle benefits into broad, flexible programs. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Compt customers now offer an all-inclusive Lifestyle Spending Account (LSA).

At the same time, organizations are using that shared infrastructure to build very different programs around their workforce needs, from targeted professional development and caregiving benefits to country-specific support for global employees.

More employers are expanding practical benefits. Employers also expanded access to everyday support while keeping typical funding levels in check. Commuter stipend adoption rose from 7.6% to 9% of Compt customers even as median funding declined 23%. Connectivity and food benefits followed the same pattern: more employers offering them at lower typical funding.

The full report shows how these decisions vary by company size, industry, geography, and workforce structure, giving HR and Total Rewards teams a midyear view of where benefit strategies are shifting while there is still time to adjust.

Employee choice remains one of the most consistent findings in the data. Roughly 70% of stipend spending falls outside national vendors to local, independent, niche, and regional businesses, a share that has held steady since Compt began tracking the benchmark in 2022.

The report also explores several emerging trends, including the rise of Treat Yourself as the top LSA subcategory, new patterns in GLP-1 and weight management spending, differences in benefit funding by industry, and the ways AI companies are using targeted benefits to compete for talent.

The full 2026 Midyear Lifestyle Benefits Benchmark Report, including a five-question checklist to pressure-test a program ahead of benefits renewals, is available now.

About Compt

Compt is a global, reimbursement-based platform for flexible stipends and Lifestyle Spending Accounts (LSAs). Employers decide what they want to offer and Compt handles the operational work behind it, including reimbursement review, tax treatment, and ongoing administration. That gives employees the freedom to choose what fits their lives without creating more work for HR and Finance teams. Compt supports companies across all 50 U.S. states and worldwide. Learn more at www.compt.io.

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