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AI’s double-edged impact on the future of work: growth opportunities meet human challenges

Executive Summary

As artificial intelligence rapidly transforms the workplace, surprising new data is challenging the old narrative of inevitable job loss. While AI-leading companies are adding jobs and boosting productivity, employees on the ground are sounding alarms about trust, training and culture. For CEOs and boards, the message is clear: success in the AI era hinges not just on technology, but on how leaders redesign work and support their people through unprecedented change.

New evidence: AI as a job creator (and productivity booster)

(www.pwc.com [1])This week delivered an eye-opening reality check on AI’s impact: rather than slashing headcounts, companies at the forefront of AI adoption are often **hiring more and paying more**. PwC’s newly released 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer - an analysis of over one billion job postings worldwide - reveals a “two-track” labour market emerging (www.pwc.com [2]). In this dynamic, **“professionalised” roles** (where AI augments skilled experts) are thriving, while **“democratised” roles** (where AI makes tasks easier for less-skilled workers) see slower growth. The result? Companies successfully leveraging AI show higher growth in jobs, productivity and wages than those lagging behind.

The numbers are striking. Firms most adept at using AI have expanded their workforces by 52% since 2018, far outpacing the 36% growth at their less AI-exposed peers (www.pwc.com [3]). These AI leaders are not just more productive - a select group of “AI super-stars” even achieved a staggering 163% boost in labour productivity over five years (www.pwc.com [4]) - but they’re also sharing the benefits with employees through higher pay. On average, jobs requiring AI skills now command a **62% wage premium** (up from 57% a year ago) as demand for talent in fields like machine learning and generative AI soars (www.pwc.com [5]). And while alarmist headlines often warn of an AI employment apocalypse, the PwC data suggests the opposite: by automating routine work and unleashing human expertise, **AI can be a “job expander,” not just a job killer (www.pwc.com [6]) (www.pwc.com [7]).**

Yet even as these leading organisations hire, overall signals in the job market are more nuanced. A fresh S&P Global survey of businesses worldwide indicates the net impact of AI on employment has turned **slightly negative** after years of being neutral or positive (www.spglobal.com [8]). Over the past 12 months, a small plurality of firms reported trimming staff due to AI, resulting in a net employment impact of about -5 percentage points (companies reducing headcount minus those adding) (www.spglobal.com [9]). Larger enterprises, which are further along in AI adoption, now anticipate modest workforce reductions, even as their productivity climbs (www.spglobal.com [10]) (www.spglobal.com [11]). By contrast, many smaller firms still expect AI to help **grow** their teams along with their business. This divergence underlines that AI’s effect on jobs is not uniform - it

depends greatly on how companies choose to implement the technology.

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Redesigning roles and workflows around AI

The conversation among executives has shifted from **whether** to adopt AI, to **how to reorganise** their businesses to maximise its value. In fact, an extensive Mercer global talent survey found 98% of executives plan to make organisational design changes in the next two years, with AI as a key driver (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [1]). Nearly all also expect the technology will lead to at least some workforce reductions (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [2]). The hard truth emerging is that simply layering AI onto traditional structures isn't enough - 63% of C-suite leaders now say redefining work around AI and automation is the people initiative most critical to achieving a return on their tech investments (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [3]).

What does an AI-driven organisational redesign look like in practice? For many, it means **flatter hierarchies, agile teams, and new hybrid roles** that weave AI into daily workflows (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [4]). Routine tasks are being automated or delegated to AI "agents," freeing employees to focus on the uniquely human elements of their jobs. Some firms are even planning structures where AI systems and human employees are managed side-by-side within the same teams (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [5]). In tandem, companies are revamping performance metrics and job definitions. For example, one global consulting firm recently overhauled all US job titles and introduced a new top-tier leadership category as part of a "talent architecture" modernisation, explicitly linking the change to new skills demanded by AI-informed services (www.hrgrapevine.com [6]) (www.hrgrapevine.com [7]).

Even the C-suite is not exempt from this evolution. Over the past decade, businesses have added roles like **Chief AI Officer, Chief Data Officer, and Chief Ethics Officer** - titles that went from curiosities to commonplace as new capabilities and risks emerged (hbr.org [8]). These moves signal that AI isn't just an IT project; it touches every facet of the organisation. The result is a fundamental rethink of who does what. As AI handles more routine analysis and coordination, professionals often find their roles "up-skilled" - requiring more creativity, judgment, and leadership. This transformation is compressing the traditional career ladder: entry-level jobs in highly AI-driven fields are now seven times more likely to demand senior-level skills like strategic thinking and leadership, and these "seniorized" junior roles have grown 35% since 2019 even as conventional entry-level jobs declined by 10% (www.pwc.com [9]). For employers, it means reimagining workflows and career paths so that

human judgment and machine efficiency reinforce each other, rather than conflict.

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Employee sentiment: trust, turbulence and turnover risks

For many employees on the front lines of this AI revolution, the experience has been disorienting. Recent surveys paint a picture of a workforce that is **eager to benefit from AI** but deeply concerned about how it's being implemented. One global poll of thousands of workers and executives found 54% of employees actively **avoid using their company's AI tools** - and a full one-third say they never use them (futurism.com [1]). The same study exposed a gaping trust divide: 61% of senior executives trust AI for high-stakes decision-making, while only 9% of non-managers do (futurism.com [2]). This mismatch in perception is leading to frustration on both sides. While 81% of leaders believe AI has "significantly improved" productivity, employees report spending an average of **8 hours a week cleaning up AI errors**, essentially losing 51 workdays a year to flawed outputs (futurism.com [3]).

Some workers aren't just disengaged from new tech - they're actively **resisting or even sabotaging** it. According to a recent Writer/Workplace Intelligence report, employees across North America and Europe admit to ignoring AI processes or pretending to comply with AI tools while secretly doing things the old way (workplaceinsight.net [4]). This kind of covert pushback stems from fear and mistrust: many believe AI is being introduced mainly to cut jobs, not help them, which breeds understandable scepticism (workplaceinsight.net [5]). In some cases, workers say the new AI systems actually make their jobs more complicated, not less, reinforcing their doubts. Meanwhile, a small cohort of "AI super-users" is fully embracing the tech and seeing productivity gains, widening the divide between early adopters and reluctant resisters (workplaceinsight.net [6]).

The human toll of poorly managed AI change is becoming impossible to ignore - and it carries real retention risks. One HR industry study found that while only 4% of employers felt resistant employees were an obstacle, nearly **22% of workers said they would consider quitting if forced to use AI in ways they don't support (www.hcamag.com [7]).** As Stephanie Davis Neill, COO of onboarding firm Click Boarding, put it, "The rapid adoption of AI has many employees… feeling like everything is spinning… Just like AI must learn, so do the employees working with it. It is a process, not just a switch to turn on" (www.hcamag.com [8]). In other words, if leaders push technology without listening to employee concerns and providing support, they may lose the very people meant to benefit from these tools. Companies succeeding with AI are those treating implementation as a human-centric change process - fostering transparency, providing training, and clearly communicating how AI will support (not replace) employees. Without that trust and clarity, even the best AI systems won't reach

their potential - and could backfire, driving your top talent out the door.

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Bridging the skills & capability gap

All these changes point to a simple but daunting challenge: **workforce skills must keep up with technology**. Here too, the latest data gives leaders reason to pause and reflect. More than half of employees worldwide worry their current skills will soon be outdated, according to Mercer’s 2026 global talent trends survey (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [1]). In that study, a majority of workers said they would even sacrifice future pay raises in exchange for more opportunities to develop AI and digital skills (www.ceotodaymagazine.com [2]). From data analytics to prompt engineering, AI is driving demand for new skills faster than traditional corporate learning programmes can supply. It’s a growing source of anxiety for employees - and a potential choke point for companies seeking to capitalise on AI.

The **capability gap** extends from the factory floor to the executive suite. Organisations are hungry for AI-savvy talent, but often find shortages in key areas. New technical roles like **machine learning engineers, AI ethicists, and automation specialists** are being created every day. For instance, LinkedIn has seen AI-related job postings surge by double or triple digits in many industries (www.weforum.org [3]). Yet a new analysis of S&P 500 companies shows that 71% of these AI job openings are at the senior level, versus just 13% targeting junior candidates (www.financial-world.org [4]) (www.financial-world.org [5]). In other words, companies are mostly competing over a limited pool of seasoned AI experts, while entry-level opportunities shrink. This “senior experience bias” in hiring risks leaving a generation of young workers with fewer pathways into tech careers (www.financial-world.org [6]) (www.financial-world.org [7]) - and it suggests firms may be underinvesting in developing talent from within.

Forward-thinking leaders are starting to tackle this problem head-on. Some enterprises are launching massive upskilling programmes to bring their people along on the AI journey, rather than leave them behind. In the banking sector, for example, HSBC’s Chief Executive **Georges Elhedery** recently announced plans to retrain 200,000 employees - essentially the bank’s entire workforce - to help them adapt to AI-driven changes in finance (invezz.com [8]) (invezz.com [9]). “We all know generative AI will destroy certain jobs and create new jobs,” Elhedery noted, but he emphasised that his priority is keeping his team on board through the transition. His mission, he said, is to have “200,000 colleagues with us on this journey,” and the real challenge is ensuring those people **have the training and tools to make themselves future-ready, more productive versions of themselves (invezz.com [10]).** Other companies are similarly pouring resources into continuous learning - in some cases re-training hundreds of thousands of workers - recognising that **the next era of business will belong to those who enable their workforce to harness AI effectively**.

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Leadership, culture, and the Human+AI integration

The difference between organisations that thrive with AI and those that struggle often boils down to **leadership and culture**. Adopting AI at scale isn't just a technical upgrade - it's "the defining leadership challenge of our times," as one Harvard Business Review piece put it (hbr.org [1]). Every previous tech revolution, from railroads to the internet, transformed what it takes to lead. AI is now doing the same, forcing CEOs and boards to rethink their own roles and mindsets. Expertise and past experience will matter less than the ability to learn fast, adapt, and guide teams through ambiguity. In an age when algorithms can analyse data or draft reports in seconds, the most effective leaders will be those who excel at what machines cannot: inspiring trust, exercising ethical judgment, and cultivating human creativity and cohesion.

Encouragingly, many top executives see the opportunity - but **action is lagging** in critical areas. A Grant Thornton survey of 950 C-level leaders found that while three out of four corporate boards have approved major AI investments, nearly half have yet to establish clear AI governance policies or integrate AI risks into their oversight duties (www.grantthornton.com [2]). In other words, lots of companies are rushing to spend on AI, but fewer are ensuring the guardrails and strategies are in place to deploy it responsibly. The same study highlights a stark performance divide: organisations that have fully integrated AI (with strong alignment, oversight, and upskilling) are almost **four times more likely to see AI driving revenue growth** (58% versus 15% among those stuck in pilot mode) (www.grantthornton.com [3]). This underscores a crucial point for leadership: **a cohesive strategy and governance structure aren't brakes on innovation - they're prerequisites for scalable success** (www.grantthornton.com [4]) (www.grantthornton.com [5]).

Leaders also face growing pressure to navigate the **ethical and social implications** of AI at work. In Europe, pending regulations like the **EU AI Act** will impose strict requirements on the use of AI in HR and hiring processes, making governance and transparency a boardroom issue. And employees themselves are demanding a voice: in an unprecedented move, nearly 300 researchers at Google's DeepMind AI lab in London recently sought union recognition - with 98% in favour - to insist on stronger say over how their AI work is used, including calls for limits on military applications and a true independent ethics board (thenextweb.com [6]). These developments send a clear signal: successfully integrating humans and AI is as much about values and trust as it is about algorithms. Organisations that foster an open, inclusive dialogue with their workforce - and proactively shape

policies for responsible AI use - will not only avoid backlash, but also cultivate a culture where human-AI collaboration can flourish. In the end, the **winning companies of the AI era will be those that pair technological ambition with genuine investment in their people** - empowering employees with new tools, protecting their well-being and purpose, and earning their trust as partners in innovation.

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Key Statistics

- 52% vs 36% - Headcount growth at highly AI-exposed companies (since 2018) compared to the least AI-exposed peers ([www.pwc.com](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html#:~:text=%E2%80%98democratised%E2%80%99%20roles%20,level)).
- 62% - Average wage premium for roles requiring AI skills in 2026 (up from ~57% in 2025) ([www.pwc.com](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html#:~:text=17%25%29%20%E2%80%9CSuper,AI%20is%20rapidly%20reshaping%20the)).
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- 54% - Share of workers who actively avoid using their employer’s AI tools (one-third never use them) ([futurism.com](https://futurism.com/future-society/ai-enterprise-workers-survey#:~:text=findings%2C%2054%20percent%20of%20workers,88%20percent%20of%20corporate%20bigwigs)).
- 22% - Workers who would consider quitting if forced to use AI tools in ways they don’t support ([www.hcamag.com](https://www.hcamag.com/us/specialization/leadership/is-your-ai-strategy-driving-employees-away/566825#:~:text=employer%20and%20employee%20perceptions,on%20Glassdoor%20reviews%20and%20social)).
- 200,000 - Employees that HSBC is retraining to be “future ready” amid AI-driven changes ([invezz.com](https://invezz.com/news/2026/05/20/hsbc-retraining-workforce-as-ai-reshapes-financial-industry-jobs/#:~:text=20%2C%202026%2C%2002%3A48%20AM%20HSBC,on%20Wednesday%20that%20artificial%20intelligence)).
- 4x - Greater likelihood of AI-driven revenue growth in companies with fully integrated AI vs. those only piloting (58% vs 15% reporting gains) ([www.grantthornton.com](https://www.grantthornton.com/services/advisory-services/artificial-intelligence/2026-ai-impact-survey#:~:text=audit%20in%2090%20days%20x,Governance%20Strategy%20Workforce%20Risk%20Performance)).

KEY TAKEAWAY

AI is a leadership issue now. New evidence shows that thoughtful AI integration can drive growth ([www.pwc.com](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/

pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html#:~:text=%E2%80%98democratised%E2%80%99%20roles%20,level)), but rushing in without investing in people, culture and governance risks backlash and lost talent ([www.hcamag.com](https://www.hcamag.com/us/specialization/leadership/is-your-ai-strategy-driving-employees-away/566825#:~:text=employer%20and%20employee%20perceptions,on%20Glassdoor%20reviews%20and%20social)). Leaders must guide change with empathy and clarity.

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