

AI Shake-Up at Work: Surprises Force Leaders to Rethink People Strategy

Executive Summary

New data and events in the past 48 hours reveal how AI's impact on work is defying expectations. From employees demanding an 'AI wealth fund' ([www.cnn.com \[1\]](https://www.cnn.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)) to companies rehiring staff after automation misfires ([techcrunch.com \[2\]](https://techcrunch.com/2026/06/28/ford-rehires-gray-beard-engineers-after-ai-falls-short/#:~:text=Ford%20executives%20said%20they%20have,Ford%E2%80%99s%20vice%20president%20of%20vehicle)), it's clear the future of work with AI will require a reset in leadership approach. Major surveys show 79% of organizations are struggling to get real value from AI without upskilling their people ([futurefactors.ai \[3\]](https://futurefactors.ai/enterprise-ai-adoption-2026-what-research-reveals/#the-numbers#:~:text=Only%2025,transformation%20despite%20years%20of%20investment)). The message to executives: to harness AI's potential without losing talent, leaders must tackle trust issues and skills gaps and redesign work with humans and AI in true partnership.

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[2] [techcrunch.com](https://techcrunch.com/2026/06/28/ford-rehires-gray-beard-engineers-after-ai-falls-short/#:~:text=Ford%20executives%20said%20they%20have,Ford%E2%80%99s%20vice%20president%20of%20vehicle) — <https://techcrunch.com/2026/06/28/ford-rehires-gray-beard-engineers-after-ai-falls-short/#:~:text=Ford%20executives%20said%20they%20have,Ford%E2%80%99s%20vice%20president%20of%20vehicle>
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Employee Backlash and New Demands

([www.cnn.com \[1\]](https://www.cnn.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)) A newly released U.S. survey finds that 69% of Americans now support establishing an 'AI sovereign wealth fund' funded by big AI companies ([www.cnn.com \[2\]](https://www.cnn.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)). The idea – essentially forcing leading AI firms to hand over a significant share of their equity to the public – reflects surging frustration over recent tech-sector layoffs and fears of job displacement due to automation. Even as many companies report healthy profits, workers have grown anxious that they won't share in AI's benefits while bearing the brunt of its disruptions ([www.cnn.com \[3\]](https://www.cnn.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)). After an estimated 150,000 tech jobs were cut this year with 'AI restructuring' cited as a justification by some firms ([www.machinebrief.com \[4\]](https://www.machinebrief.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)), employees are increasingly skeptical of assurances that AI will only 'augment' their work and not replace it.

This growing unease isn't confined to frontline staff – it's reaching even the highly skilled ranks of AI creators. In London, nearly 300 Google DeepMind employees have taken the unprecedented step of seeking union recognition, the first union push at a major AI research lab ([www.metaintro.com \[5\]](https://www.metaintro.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)). Their demands go beyond pay and job security. These AI workers want a formal voice in how their innovations are used – including an independent ethics board and the right to refuse work on projects they deem morally objectionable, such as developing AI for weapons or mass surveillance ([www.metaintro.com \[6\]](https://www.metaintro.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)). Google's leadership declined to voluntarily recognize the union, and initial negotiations have been tense, highlighting how AI's ethical and workforce implications are converging ([letsdatascience.com \[7\]](https://letsdatascience.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)).

Beyond the headline-grabbing actions, many employees are quietly resisting everyday AI adoption in the workplace. A global 'State of Digital Adoption' study found that over half of workers had bypassed an available AI tool at least once in the past month and reverted to manual methods, while a full one-third hadn't used workplace AI at all (finance.yahoo.com [8]). Researchers describe this phenomenon as not mere friction but 'outright rejection' born of mistrust and frustration with the tools (finance.yahoo.com [9]). Only 9% of employees surveyed said they trust AI for important decisions at work, compared to 61% of executives – a staggering 52-point trust gap (finance.yahoo.com [10]). Many staff remain unconvinced that AI can reliably handle complex, nuanced tasks, or they fear that embracing it will simply hasten their own replacement. The result is that new AI systems often go underused, blunting the very productivity gains that companies hope to achieve.

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Automation Layoff Regrets and Rehiring

For companies that leapt into large-scale automation, the latest reports offer a cautionary tale. More than half of business leaders whose firms have cut employees due to AI now concede that those layoffs might have been a mistake (news.aibase.com [1]). A February survey of HR professionals found nearly two-thirds of organizations that made AI-driven job cuts ended up rehiring for those same roles within months of the initial layoff (www.forbes.com [2]). In many cases, the anticipated savings from replacing humans with software failed to materialize – 31% of companies said rehiring costs ended up outweighing the original savings, and another 42% reported that any short-term gains were negated by the operational disruption and hidden costs of lost expertise (www.forbes.com [3]). It's little wonder that the industry's narrative is shifting from talk of 'completely replacing humans' to a new focus on 'human-machine collaboration' as a more sustainable path forward (news.aibase.com [4]).

One stark example comes from Ford's recent automation reversal. The auto giant had been relying on AI-driven design and quality control systems, until mounting warranty issues and production glitches forced a rethink (techcrunch.com [5]). A top Ford executive admitted they had mistakenly assumed that simply feeding their vehicle design requirements into AI would automatically result in high-quality output (techcrunch.com [6]). The reality was different: critical human judgment and experience were missing. In response, Ford rehired about 350 veteran engineers – many of them retired “grey beards” – to work alongside AI tools and mentor younger staff in spotting and preventing engineering mistakes (techcrunch.com [7]). The payoff was swift. With seasoned human experts back in the loop, Ford reports it slashed warranty and recall costs by “hundreds and hundreds of millions” of dollars

and vaulted to its highest customer quality ratings in 16 years (techcrunch.com [8]).

Similar lessons are playing out elsewhere. In Australia, the Commonwealth Bank (CBA) tried to replace 45 call-center employees with an AI-powered voice bot, only to find that the technology couldn't handle surging call volumes and complex customer inquiries. Within weeks, CBA reversed the layoffs, issued a public apology and offered every affected employee their job back – an outcome the bank acknowledged was necessary after it failed to 'adequately consider all relevant factors' in its rush to automate (www.abc.net.au [9]). The bank's about-face, celebrated by the finance workers' union as a "major win," underscores the importance of thoroughly vetting AI tools before cutting human roles (www.abc.net.au [10]) (www.abc.net.au [11]). Even tech bellwether IBM has tempered its approach to AI-driven workforce reductions. After its CEO grabbed headlines in 2023 by announcing a pause in hiring for roles that could be automated, IBM reportedly found that some AI systems couldn't handle nuanced HR and customer service tasks (news.aibase.com [12]). The company has since shifted course, committing to double the number of new entry-level hires in the US by 2026 – a recognition that human talent will be needed to fill gaps that AI cannot (news.aibase.com [13]).

These turnarounds highlight a fundamental truth: successful AI adoption isn't about simply swapping out people for algorithms. The companies pulling ahead are those treating AI as a tool for augmenting human capabilities rather than a replacement for them (www.forbes.com [14]). They are redesigning jobs and processes to let AI handle repetitive or data-heavy work while humans focus on creativity, complex problem-solving, and interpersonal connections. As a result, they preserve invaluable institutional knowledge and employee trust – and avoid the costly cycle of cutting too deep, only to scramble later when automation falls short.

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The Widening Skills and Capability Gap

Even as corporate spending on AI hits new highs, a stubborn paradox is coming into focus: the technology is advancing rapidly, but many organizations are not seeing the expected gains. Two major new surveys – one by Deloitte, covering 3,235 global business and IT leaders, and another by AI firm Writer with 2,400 executive respondents – found that roughly 75% of companies are still not achieving significant value from their AI initiatives (futurefactors.ai [1]). Only about one in four organizations reports that AI is having a truly transformative impact on their business, and similarly just 25% have managed to move at least 40% of their AI pilot projects into full production use so far (futurefactors.ai [2]) (futurefactors.ai [3]). According to Deloitte's study, the most-cited obstacle isn't a lack of technology – it's a lack of human capabilities. In other words, the principal barrier to scaling AI is a widespread skills gap: most employees outside of IT and data science have not been trained to integrate AI into their daily work, so new tools often end up underutilized (futurefactors.ai [4]).

This talent deficit is creating a dangerous divide within companies. One recent survey revealed that 92% of C-suite leaders are focusing on developing an 'AI elite' among their workforce, and an alarming 60% even say they plan to lay off workers who fail to adapt to new AI-based processes (futurefactors.ai [5]). Yet many employees are eager to embrace AI if given proper support – in fact, 68% of workers said they want more training in AI tools to help them perform better in their jobs (careertrainer.ai [6]). The risk for organizations is a growing gap between those who have the skills (or support) to thrive alongside AI and those left behind, which can erode morale and performance.

In response, forward-looking organizations are ramping up investment in upskilling and role redesign. At this year's World Economic Forum in Davos, leaders of 25 major tech companies pledged to expand employees' access to AI tools, boost digital skills training, and create new career paths into AI-focused roles for their workforces (www.weforum.org [7]). Many companies are launching internal "AI academies" and mentorship programs to build capability across all departments, not just in technical teams. New hybrid roles – for instance, 'prompt engineers', 'AI ethics officers', or AI-enhanced product managers – were virtually unheard of a few years ago but are now emerging as some of the fastest-growing job titles in the market (www.resumly.ai [8]) (www.resumly.ai [9]). Nonetheless, roughly 70% of organizations report they still can't find enough employees skilled in AI, and 45% say these talent gaps are already slowing down their AI implementations (careertrainer.ai [10]). The imperative for leadership is becoming clear: closing the skills gap and empowering existing employees to work effectively with AI is critical for any company aiming to fully realize the technology's potential.

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Leading AI Transformation Without Losing People

Amid the excitement – and anxiety – about AI, it's apparent that strong leadership is required to translate technological promise into sustainable performance. Tech executives maintain that demand for AI remains 'almost unlimited,' even as market volatility has sparked debate about a possible AI investment bubble ([www.cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com/2026/07/12/ai-demand-chips-data-centers-stock-volatility.html#:~:text=week%2C%20several%20AI%20executives%20poured,almost%20unlimited%2C%20energy%20is%20real) [1]). And according to a global KPMG survey, 74% of top business leaders say AI will stay a high investment priority for them, even if an economic recession strikes in the next year ([kpmg.com](https://kpmg.com/xx/en/media/press-releases/2026/03/kpmg-global-ai-pulse-survey.html#:~:text=will%20prioritize%20AI%20investment%20despite,further%2027%20percent%20orchestrating%20multiple) [2]). However, the era of adopting new tech for its own sake is giving way to a more disciplined approach. As one AI industry veteran quipped, many firms went through a period of 'tokenmaxxing' – pushing employees to use AI everywhere, without a clear plan – and are now transitioning to 'valuemaxxing' by applying AI only where it drives concrete results ([www.cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com/2026/07/12/ai-demand-chips-data-centers-stock-volatility.html#:~:text=enterprises%20are%20willing%20to%20pay,return%20on%20investment%20as%20a) [3]).

In practice, leading companies are pivoting from grandiose AI plans to targeted, people-centric strategies. Rather than declaring a sweeping 'AI transformation' and automating broadly, high performers start with one or two high-impact workflows and reengineer them from the ground up with AI assistance (futurefactors.ai [4]). These focused wins build internal credibility and know-how that make it easier to scale AI elsewhere in the organization. Crucially, those companies also invest in training their workforce before rolling out new AI systems – Deloitte's data shows that upping employee education was the number one talent strategy change at organizations seeing significant AI success (futurefactors.ai [5]).

Another key to success is expanding AI access in a thoughtful, supported way. The most effective adopters nearly doubled the share of employees using approved AI tools (from under 40% to about 60% of staff) within a year (futurefactors.ai [6]) – but they did so with clear guidance, governance, and support structures in place. These organizations treat AI as critical business infrastructure to be customized, maintained, and continually refined, rather than as a one-off experiment. Many have begun developing their own tailored AI models and “agents” for specific tasks, instead of waiting for off-the-shelf solutions to solve all their problems (futurefactors.ai [7]). This disciplined approach helps avoid the common pitfall of endless pilot projects that never scale, a fate that still plagues roughly three-quarters of companies pursuing AI today (futurefactors.ai [8]).

Ultimately, what separates the leaders from the laggards in human+AI integration is how well they manage the people side of change. Organizations that thrive with AI tend to foster a culture of transparency, continuous learning, and adaptation. They look for opportunities where automation can genuinely relieve employees of drudge work, and they redeploy human talent toward higher-value activities rather than simply cutting it. As one tech CEO put it, the aim is for humans and AI to 'make each other more effective' – with AI handling the high-volume, repetitive tasks so that people can focus on creativity, complex problem-solving and the human touch (www.forbes.com [9]). By positioning AI as a tool to amplify human potential – not replace it – savvy leaders can drive innovation and efficiency while maintaining morale and trust, ensuring their workforce remains engaged and invested in the transformation.

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Key Statistics

- 69% of U.S. workers support a plan to make large AI companies transfer 50% of their stock to a public “AI wealth fund” for workers, according to a June 2026 Verasight survey ([www.cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=Points%20Sixty,to%20AI%2C%20but%20also%20face)).
- Goldman Sachs estimates that AI could displace more than 15 million U.S. workers – roughly 9% of the workforce – over the next decade, a shock comparable to the late 1990s tech boom ([www.cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com/2026/07/12/majority-of-us-workers-support-ai-fund-amid-tech-layoffs-survey.html#:~:text=maximize%20their%20power%20and%20profit%2C,in%20other%20periods%20of%20significant)).
- 55% of business leaders who laid off employees due to AI now say that decision was a mistake (Orgvue survey, 2026) ([news.aibase.com](https://news.aibase.com/news/29309#:~:text=replacing%20humans%22%20to%20%22human,to%20redundant%20work%20and%20reduced)).
- WalkMe’s 2026 “State of Digital Adoption” study found 54% of workers had bypassed an AI tool to do a task manually in the past month, and 33% had not used workplace AI at all – an ‘outright rejection’ by many employees ([finance.yahoo.com](https://finance.yahoo.com/sectors/technology/articles/enterprises-lose-51-workdays-per-100000835.html#:~:text=09%2C%202026%20%28GLOBE%20NEWSWIRE%29%20,critical)).
- Companies most able to harness AI have grown their headcount by 52% (2018–2025), outpacing the 36% growth at the least AI-driven firms, according to PwC’s 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer ([www.pwc.com](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html#:~:text=human,level)).

KEY TAKEAWAY

Leading AI-driven change without losing people means treating it as a human transformation as much as a technological one. These developments underscore that leaders must address employees’ job security fears, invest in broad upskilling, and redesign roles and workflows for effective human–AI collaboration.

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