LUMO INSIGHTS

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# AI at work: latest shifts defy the hype

## Executive Summary

New data from the last 48 hours is challenging assumptions about AI's impact on work. While over 84% of companies now use AI, only about 5% are seeing strategic benefits (www.forbes.com [1]). Even more surprising, over half of workers say AI is actually adding to their workload (www.forbes.com [2]). These findings are forcing leaders to rethink how they integrate AI with their people and processes.

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## The Adoption-Impact Gap

Business leaders are waking up to a disconnect between AI adoption and tangible results. Despite the prevalence of AI in the corporate world - with one recent analysis showing 84% of companies now using AI in some form - only about 5% of them report any strategic benefit from it (www.forbes.com [1]). In other words, nearly everyone has jumped on the AI bandwagon, but few are seeing significant payoff yet. Another survey of global executives found that more than half saw no measurable improvement in revenue or cost savings from their AI investments in the past year, and only 12% achieved both outcomes (masterofcode.com [2]). This ROI shortfall is a stark reality check for anyone who assumed that simply deploying the latest AI tools would automatically boost the bottom line.

Many organisations are discovering that purchasing AI technology is the easy part - integrating it effectively is much harder. Experts note that companies often plunge into AI projects without clear strategies or adequate preparation, leading to limited results. The rush to implement "shiny" new AI solutions without rethinking business processes or training people can result in pilots that never scale or tools that employees don't fully adopt. The current moment is prompting sober reflection in boardrooms: if the vast majority of firms aren't yet seeing real value from AI, what are the few high performers doing differently? Leaders are increasingly realising that getting a return on AI means going beyond buzzwords to fundamentally redesign workflows and capabilities for an AI-driven age.

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## Productivity paradox: jobs and workloads

Early fears that AI would wipe out jobs en masse have not materialised in the way many expected. In fact, in the industries most exposed to AI, companies have actually been growing their workforces faster than others. A global jobs analysis by PwC found that the organisations adopting AI most aggressively expanded headcount by 52% - significantly outpacing the 36% growth at less AI-focused peers (www.pwc.com [1]). These same AI leaders also saw higher wage growth for their people, suggesting they are using the technology to augment and elevate human roles rather than eliminate them. In short, AI can be a catalyst for new opportunities and productivity - when deployed with a growth mindset - instead of just a tool for cost-cutting.

Yet at the day-to-day level, the picture is more complicated. A new workforce survey reveals that while 79% of CEOs claim AI has increased efficiencies, only about half of their employees agree - and 52% of workers say AI has actually increased their workloads (www.forbes.com [2]). Far from ushering in the frictionless productivity gain or the four-day workweeks that optimists predicted, AI is sometimes adding to the "busywork" as employees grapple with new tools on top of their regular duties. In many companies, staff reductions attributed to AI have left remaining employees juggling multiple roles: more than three in five workers (around 61%) report they are now performing the work of colleagues who were laid off (www.forbes.com [3]). This so-called "super workload" means that without proper implementation, AI can inadvertently create more work or stress for employees instead of less.

There is also evidence that AI could widen performance disparities among employees. Rather than automatically boosting everyone's output, AI tends to significantly amplify the capabilities of those who learn to leverage it effectively - sometimes making top performers "10×" as productive - while leaving more traditional workers further behind (www.forbes.com [4]). In other words, advanced AI tools can act as a force multiplier for highly skilled or adaptable talent, but those who don't upskill risk stagnating. This performance gap is an unintended consequence: unless organisations invest in broad training and thoughtful job redesign, AI may benefit a select few while others struggle to keep pace.

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## Skills and roles: The growing gap

All of this points to an urgent skills and capability gap in the era of AI. Analysts have been warning that as AI adoption accelerates, companies face a massive talent shortfall. An industry report this week reiterated that over 90% of large enterprises expect to confront critical AI-related skill shortages by 2026, potentially putting as much as $5.5 trillion in economic value at risk if those gaps aren't filled (www.workera.ai [1]). Paradoxically, even as companies poured money into AI technology (global AI spending hit an estimated $550 billion in 2024), many cut back on training budgets by double digits that same year, exacerbating the problem (kju.ai [2]). The result is a workforce that is expected to collaborate with intelligent systems but often hasn't been prepared to do so at scale.

In the absence of sufficient formal training programmes, employees are increasingly turning to each other - and to grassroots communities - to develop AI skills on the fly. One Forbes analysis notes that the whopping $5.5 trillion AI skills gap is being filled by “peer leaders, not corporate L&D,” as workers share knowledge and build human-centred AI learning pathways themselves (www.forbes.com [3]). On the bright side, entirely new roles are also emerging to meet the needs of an AI-driven workplace. Jobs that barely existed a few years ago - from prompt engineers and AI ethicists to AI project managers - are now in demand. For example, some companies are hiring “AI trainers” (people who teach and fine-tune AI models by providing human feedback) at rates up to $200 per hour, and notably these roles don’t even require a traditional tech background (www.forbes.com [4]). This proliferation of new roles and peer-led upskilling efforts shows how the workforce is evolving alongside AI. The challenge for organisations is to support and harness this evolution, rather than leaving it to chance.

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## Leadership, culture & trust

Perhaps the most counterintuitive revelation is that technology itself is rarely the barrier to AI transformation - people are. New research from Stanford’s Digital Economy Lab found that 95% of failed AI projects in companies could be traced back to organisational issues like unprepared workers, poor governance, or lack of executive support, rather than technical shortcomings (www.beri.net [1]). In other words, if your AI initiative isn’t delivering, it’s probably not because the algorithms didn’t work - it’s because the organisation wasn’t ready for them. This underscores that successful AI adoption requires changes in processes, skills, and mindset, not just plugging in new software.

Active leadership is emerging as a decisive factor in separating winners from losers in the AI era. Companies where top executives champion and guide AI efforts are far more likely to see those efforts succeed. In fact, when AI initiatives have strong C-suite sponsorship, they have a 78% chance of reaching full-scale production, versus only 23% when projects are left to middle management alone (www.beri.net [2]). Leaders who provide clear vision, invest in training, and align AI projects with business strategy empower their organisations to actually realise AI’s potential, instead of stalling out in pilot purgatory.

Meanwhile, employee trust and engagement around AI are becoming make-or-break issues. Workers who feel threatened or kept in the dark are understandably resistant to change. This week, the UK’s largest labour federation (the Trades Union Congress) publicly urged the government to give workers a legal right to negotiate how AI is implemented in their workplaces (www.theregister.com [3]), arguing that employees must be treated as "stakeholders in firms, not merely inputs to be minimised". The TUC warns that failing to involve workers in AI adoption will only fuel anxiety and backlash, citing how two-thirds of American workers now expect AI to make their work lives worse if left unchecked (www.tuc.org.uk [4]). The message is clear: neglect the human side of AI at your peril, because fear can quickly derail even well-intentioned tech initiatives.

On the other hand, when workers are empowered and included in the AI journey, they can become partners in innovation. Notably, countries with strong worker participation are also leaders in embracing workplace AI. The TUC letter pointed out that Nordic nations - where unions have a significant say in technology decisions - boast among the highest levels of AI adoption in the world (www.theregister.com [5]). When employees have more voice and bargaining power in how new technologies are rolled out, they tend to be more open to using them effectively, rather than fearing the worst.

All these developments highlight that integrating AI is “not just a technical challenge; it’s a human one,” as a recent Forbes briefing put it (www.forbes.com [6]). For C-suite and board leaders, the takeaway is that leading an AI-driven workforce transformation requires a human-centric approach. That means proactively managing the change: communicate transparently about why and how AI is being used, provide training and career pathways for employees to grow with the technology, and ensure that productivity gains benefit the people, not just the profit margins. Organisations that invest in their people and culture as they deploy AI are not only seeing better outcomes - they’re also more likely to bring their teams along on the journey, retaining talent and trust in an era of rapid technological change.

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## Key Statistics

- Over 84% of companies now use AI, but only ~5% have seen any strategic benefit from it so far ([www.forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com/topics/ai-future-of-work/#:~:text=Here%20On%20The%20Record%205,Many%20organizations%20built%20AI%20pipelines)).
- 52% of workers say using AI has actually increased their workload rather than reduced it ([www.forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelwells/2026/09/09/ai-increased-workloads-for-52-of-workers-so-much-for-productivity/#:~:text=short%2C%20according%20to%20a%20Korn,technology%20and%20realign%20their%20people)).
- More than 90% of large enterprises expect critical AI-related skill shortages by 2026 - a talent gap that could put $5.5 /trillion of economic value at risk ([www.workera.ai](https://www.workera.ai/guides-reports/the-5-5-trillion-skills-gap-what-idcs-new-report-reveals-about-ai-workforce-readiness#:~:text=Over%2090%20percent%20of%20global,from%20the%20global%20market%20performance)).

KEY TAKEAWAY

New evidence reveals a reality check: most companies aren’t seeing significant returns from AI yet, and many employees feel more burdened, not less. Leaders must shift from quick tech fixes to a people-first AI strategy that truly empowers and engages their workforce.

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