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Opinion Piece

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From Automation to Agency

Turning AI Productivity into Human Flourishing

AI | DATA GOVERNANCE | RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP | FUTURE OF WORK

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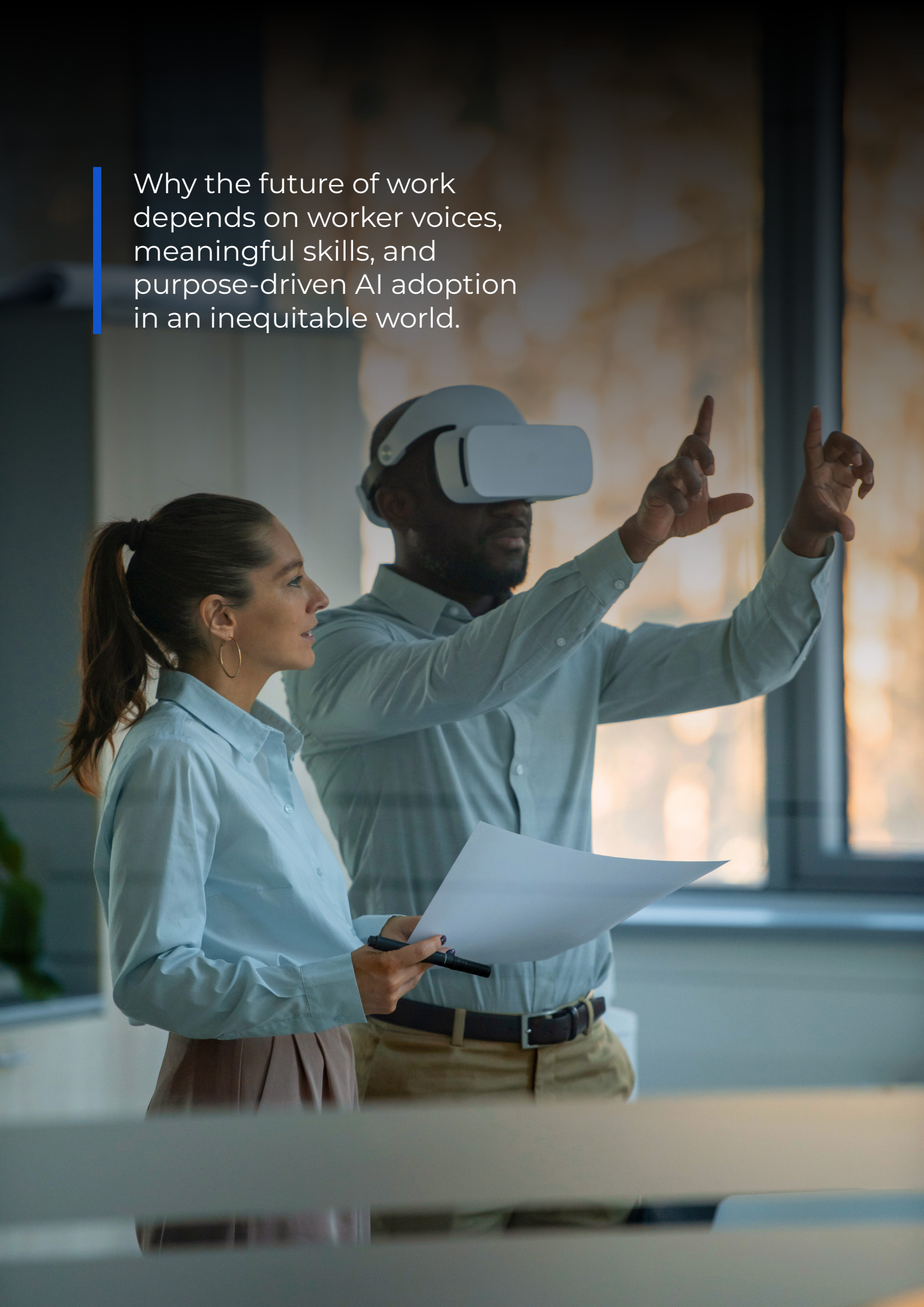
Why the future of work depends on worker voices, meaningful skills, and purpose-driven AI adoption in an inequitable world.



1.

What We Do with AI's Productivity Gains Will Define the Future of Work

For much of the past few years, debate over generative AI at work has been framed as a question of efficiency: how much productivity can be unlocked, how quickly, and at what scale. This framing, however, understates what is at stake. Generative AI is already beginning to reshape wage structures, bargaining power, job quality, and the design of workplace institutions. It is not merely a tool-level innovation; it is a general-purpose technology whose effects are already rippling through labor markets, skill demand, and the geography of work.

Public research suggests that generative AI is poised to affect a far larger share of white-collar employment than previous waves of automation. Task-based analyses (OECD 2024; Brookings 2025) find that between one-fifth and one-third of jobs in advanced economies contain a high share of tasks that are technically exposed to generative AI, particularly in professional services, administration, finance, marketing, and customer support. Unlike earlier automation technologies, which primarily displaced routine manual or clerical tasks, generative AI reaches deeply into cognitive, linguistic, and analytical work that has historically underpinned middle-class employment.

Critically, this exposure does not map neatly onto job loss. In the near term, labor-market effects are better described as task reallocation, retraining, and uneven productivity shocks. Evidence from firm-level experiments shows that generative AI disproportionately boosts the productivity of less-experienced workers by embedding expert knowledge into everyday workflows, thereby narrowing performance gaps within occupations (Li et al. 2025). At the same time, labor-market data indicate rising demand for roles that combine domain knowledge, judgment, and coordination with AI systems—such as AI-enabled team leads who interpret AI dashboards while coaching human teams, or compliance reviewers who validate AI-generated analyses in regulated environments—alongside declining demand for purely execution-oriented tasks (OECD 2024; World Economic Forum 2025). These AI-complementary roles sit at the intersection between algorithmic outputs and organizational accountability, requiring contextual interpretation and human oversight rather than routine execution.

These shifts are already reshaping labor markets geographically as well as occupationally. AI exposure is significantly higher in metropolitan, knowledge-intensive regions than in rural or peripheral areas, raising the risk that productivity gains—and the new, AI-complementary roles that follow—will concentrate where human capital and digital infrastructure are already dense (OECD 2024; Brookings 2025). Left unattended, generative AI could therefore amplify existing regional inequalities even as it raises aggregate output.

Against this backdrop, productivity gains from generative AI are real, measurable, and increasingly well-documented. In one of the first large-scale field experiments on generative AI adoption, Li et al. (2025) studied thousands of customer-service agents at a major US software company. Half the workforce received access to an AI assistant trained on transcripts from the firm's highest-performing agents. Average productivity rose by approximately 14 percent; among the least-experienced agents, output gains reached 35 percent. Subsequent experiments and corporate pilots report consistent results, with task completion times falling by 5–25 percent without measurable losses in quality (OECD 2025). Survey evidence from the St. Louis Federal Reserve suggests that workers who actively use generative AI save an average of 5.4 percent of their working hours per week, roughly two hours for a full-time employee or around one hundred hours annually (St. Louis Fed 2025).

These are non-trivial gains. The existing evidence, however, is not universally transferable. Much of the existing empirical evidence comes from specific sectors—such as customer service, professional services, or regulated environments—and from early-stage implementations. Productivity effects, distributional outcomes, and employee responses are likely to vary across industries, institutional contexts, and national labor market regimes. This variation does not weaken the argument; it reinforces the central point: AI's impact is mediated by organizational design and institutional settings rather than determined by technology alone. Productivity, labor-market disruption, and task reallocation do not, by themselves, determine whether work becomes better or worse. The central question is not whether generative AI works but who benefits from the time and value it frees, and who gets to decide.

This piece argues that generative AI marks a fork in the road for the future of work. One path treats AI primarily as an optimization engine, intensifying output, concentrating gains, and embedding managerial control more deeply into work. The other treats AI as an institutional choice: an opportunity to redesign work around human capabilities such as autonomy, learning, and purpose, with workers having a meaningful voice in how these systems are deployed. The difference between these futures is ultimately a question of governance, power, and agency.

2.

The Fork in the Road: Competing Deployment Pathways

The productivity gains documented above create a clear decision point for organizations. Companies must decide how to allocate the human time freed by AI: accelerate output and reduce labor demand, or reinvest efficiency gains into learning, autonomy, and work redesign as part of a longer-term capability-building strategy. This outcome is not technologically determined but reflects a fundamental governance choice—specifically, whether AI is deployed primarily to extract efficiency at lower cost or to strengthen human capital, and how much voice workers have in shaping how these systems are introduced and used.

Research in organizational psychology, particularly Self-Determination Theory, identifies three basic psychological needs that underpin motivation and meaningful work: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2018; Ryan 2022). When these needs are satisfied, employees exert higher effort, perform better, and experience work as meaningful; when they are frustrated, motivation and well-being decline, even in well-paid roles (Kahn et al. 2024).

AI systems can either support or undermine each of these needs, depending on how they are implemented. Experimental evidence shows that when employees retain autonomy over whether and how to use AI, along with the ability to override recommendations, engagement and learning improve markedly (University of Auckland 2024).

By contrast, algorithmic management systems introduced without worker consultation are becoming increasingly common. Survey evidence suggests that in some sectors, roughly one-third of workers now have tasks or schedules assigned by algorithms, often with limited transparency or recourse (OSHA Europa 2024; FEPS 2024). Workers subjected to intensive algorithmic monitoring report higher work intensity, increased time pressure, and elevated psychosocial risk.

Recent research captures this contrast as a “dual effect” of AI: when deployed to remove drudgery and support skill development, AI can increase job satisfaction and well-being; when experienced as imposed and opaque, it reduces job meaningfulness and motivation (Ghai et al. 2024, 2025; Karahanna et al. 2024). When organizations implement AI without accounting for the human experience of work, these systems often generate unintended consequences—disengagement, resistance, increased psychosocial risk, and declining job quality—even as measured output rises. Over time, such dynamics risk converting short-term efficiency gains into longer-term organizational fragility.

A frequently cited counter-example illustrates the point. A large European telecommunications firm engaged works councils in co-designing the deployment of an AI-based call center support system, including rules governing data use, transparency, and performance evaluation. AI was explicitly framed as decision support rather than automated enforcement, and workers retained discretion over its use. Post-implementation assessments documented maintained or improved customer service outcomes alongside high adoption and low resistance, contrasting sharply with unilateral deployments that often generate disengagement (Partnership on AI 2025; ADAPT 2025). While this case emerged within a regulatory environment with formal worker representation, the underlying principle is transferable: early participation, transparency, and preserved discretion shape whether AI functions as augmentation or control.

3.

Geography, Inequality, and the Risk of Concentration

Generative AI adoption is proceeding unevenly across labor markets. Analysis by the OECD and the Brookings Institution finds that AI exposure (the share of tasks susceptible to generative AI) is significantly higher in metropolitan, knowledge-intensive regions than in rural areas. Approximately 32 percent of jobs in large urban centres exhibit high AI exposure, compared with 21 percent in rural regions (OECD 2024; Brookings 2025). In technology and government hubs such as San Francisco, San Jose, and Washington, DC, exposure exceeds 40 percent.

Economically, this matters because generative AI functions as a knowledge amplifier. In regions dense with information-intensive industries, AI accelerates the transfer of expertise across workers and firms, lowers the cost of replicating best practices, and shortens learning curves. These dynamics make it easier to scale productivity gains and create new AI-complementary roles where human capital, digital infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems are already dense. By contrast, regions with thinner knowledge networks may struggle to capture these spillover effects, reinforcing existing geographic disparities.

This pattern reflects existing concentrations of information-intensive work, infrastructure, and human capital. Without policy intervention, regions with the highest AI exposure are best positioned to capture early productivity gains and attract AI-complementary investment, potentially widening geographic inequality. Over time, this dynamic risks reinforcing a feedback loop in which capital, talent, and innovation continue to concentrate in already-advantaged regions.

Yet OECD evidence suggests this outcome is not predetermined. Regions at risk of being left behind can participate in AI-driven growth if they invest in digital infrastructure, reskilling systems, and institutions that ensure worker voice in technology governance (OECD 2024). Practically, this can include regional training compacts that align employers, universities, and vocational institutions around AI-complementary skills; targeted public-sector AI adoption that builds local capability and demand; and place-based investment strategies that pair infrastructure upgrades with workforce development.

Ultimately, regional divergence in AI outcomes will depend less on exposure alone than on institutional capacity: the ability of local education systems, employers, and public institutions to translate technological opportunity into skills development and worker participation. This shifts the focus from geography to capability.

4.

Skills Beyond Specialization

If regional outcomes hinge on institutional capacity, then the question becomes what kinds of skills and capabilities those institutions prioritize. Public discourse on AI and work often emphasizes technical skills: coding, data science, and machine-learning engineering. Labor-market data tell a more nuanced story. OECD analysis of millions of online job postings shows that demand in AI-exposed roles is rising fastest for management, business, and socio-cognitive skills, including project management, communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and judgment (OECD 2024). The World Economic Forum similarly identifies analytical thinking, flexibility, curiosity, and lifelong learning as among the fastest-growing skill priorities (WEF 2025).

Labor markets are signalling demand not primarily for more AI specialists but for workers capable of partnering effectively with AI systems for framing problems, exercising judgment when systems fail, and coordinating across teams. Yet much corporate upskilling discourse remains narrowly focused on technical retraining, treating AI literacy as synonymous with coding or prompt engineering. The emerging evidence suggests the opposite: durable advantage lies less in mastering the tool itself than in cultivating the human capabilities that shape how it is deployed.

An evidence-based skills agenda in the age of AI therefore rests on three pillars:

- **AI Fluency:** Understanding what AI can and cannot do, how to use it effectively, and when to challenge outputs.
- **Agency Skills:** Critical thinking and ethical reasoning that enable meaningful participation in technology governance.
- **Purpose Skills:** The ability to align work with values and craft roles experienced as meaningful.

Absent investment in these capabilities, AI risks compressing work into narrow execution that is technically productive but experientially hollow. Such roles are unlikely to be sustainable. Over time, diminished meaning and agency undermine engagement and performance while rising attrition makes it increasingly difficult for employers to attract and retain the qualified talent needed to sustain productivity.

5.

Productivity Gains as Governance Choices

The human time recovered through AI-driven productivity gains highlights a broader governance question. Evidence from large-scale four-day workweek trials—most notably coordinated pilots across the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America—shows that productivity can be maintained or even improved alongside reductions in burnout, stress, and turnover (OECD 2024; WEF 2025). While many early pilots were independent of AI adoption, a growing subset of organizations explicitly integrating automation and generative AI report that technology-enabled efficiency gains are a key factor in making working-time reduction economically viable. In these cases, recovered hours are redirected toward schedule compression rather than increased throughput (OECD 2025; St. Louis Federal Reserve 2025).

Four-day schedules are not a universal template. In highly interdependent or real-time environments, coordination costs and service expectations impose real limits. However, the broader insight remains: AI exposes slack in existing workflows. Whether that slack is used to intensify targets or to redesign roles, rhythms, and recovery time is a question of organizational design, not technological necessity.

AI does not mechanically produce shorter workweeks. Rather, it makes visible that working-time allocation is a choice rather than an economic inevitability: a choice that appeared far more constrained under earlier productivity regimes (OECD 2024). If AI saves several hours per worker per week, leaders must decide what those hours purchase: intensified output at constant pressure, or space for learning, recovery, and civic engagement. A large body of organizational and psychological research shows that the latter conditions are strongly associated with higher long-term motivation, sustained performance, and employee retention (Ryan and Deci 2018; Kahn et al. 2024; Bergdahl et al. 2025). Over time, these factors compound into a competitive advantage. Firms that preserve autonomy and recovery are better positioned to innovate, adapt to shocks, and retain high-performing talent in increasingly tight labor markets.

6.

Principles for Leaders, Policymakers, and Individuals

Technological abundance does not automatically produce human flourishing. It must be governed. The following principles outline how business leaders, policymakers, and individuals can exercise that agency. While the full agenda spans firms, governments, and workers, three near-term priorities stand out: embedding worker participation in AI deployment, investing early in AI-complementary skills systems, and establishing transparency standards for algorithmic management.

6.1 For Business Leaders

- **Co-Govern AI Deployment with Workers:** Treat AI introduction as a process of co-design rather than a unilateral technology rollout. Operationally, this can include structured pilot programs with frontline teams, joint management–employee committees to review deployment decisions, clearly defined override and escalation rights, and formal feedback mechanisms tied to system iteration. Involving frontline employees early, preserving discretion over system use, and creating structured feedback loops have been shown to improve adoption, learning outcomes, and sustained performance (University of Auckland 2024; Partnership on AI 2025). Experimental and field evidence indicates that early autonomy over AI use leads to higher engagement and more constructive human–AI collaboration, even when the underlying technology remains unchanged (Li et al. 2025).
- **Deploy AI to Remove Drudgery, Not Discretion:** Prioritize AI deployment in tasks employees experience as repetitive, cognitively depleting, or low-value, rather than in areas requiring judgment and relational skill. Research on algorithmic management shows that when AI is used to intensify monitoring or constrain discretion, workers experience higher work intensity and psychosocial risk; when used to reduce drudgery, it can enhance job satisfaction and perceived job quality (OSHA Europa 2024; Ghai et al. 2024).

- **Reinvest Productivity Gains in Human Development:** Make explicit commitments to reinvest a portion of AI-enabled productivity gains in training, career development, and—where feasible—working-time reduction. Evidence from organizational psychology shows that investments strengthening autonomy, competence, and relatedness are associated with higher motivation, retention, and long-run performance, whereas productivity gains captured solely as output tend to erode these drivers over time (Ryan and Deci 2018; Kahn et al. 2024).

Among these, institutionalizing structured pilot programs and clearly defined override rights is often the most immediate and feasible starting point.

6.2 For Policymakers

- **Ensure Inclusive Access to AI-Enabling Infrastructure: I**nvest in digital infrastructure, regional training capacity, and lifelong learning systems to prevent AI-driven productivity gains from concentrating in already-advantaged metropolitan regions. OECD evidence shows that without such investments, regions with lower AI exposure risk falling further behind despite aggregate productivity growth (OECD 2024).
- **Embed Worker Voice in AI Workplace Governance:** Strengthen regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency, explainability, and due process in algorithmic management systems. Comparative evidence from European labor markets suggests that institutionalized worker voice—through works councils, collective bargaining, or social dialogue—reduces harmful deployment patterns while supporting innovation and adoption (FEPS 2024; ETUC 2022).
- **Modernise Job-Quality Measurement:** Update labor-market frameworks to track job quality alongside employment and wages, incorporating indicators such as autonomy, work intensity, security, and work meaningfulness defined in measurable terms. In practice, meaningfulness can be proxied through indicators including task discretion, opportunities for skill use and development, perceived usefulness of work, alignment between job tasks and worker values, and validated survey measures of engagement and purpose. Without such metrics, policy risks optimizing narrowly for output while overlooking documented links between job quality, well-being, and sustainable productivity (OECD 2024; Bergdahl et al. 2025).

In the near term, transparency and due-process requirements in algorithmic management may be the most foundational step.

6.3 For Individuals

- **Develop AI Literacy as a Professional Capability:** Build a practical understanding of what AI systems can and cannot do, how to work effectively with them, and when to challenge outputs. Empirical research links higher AI literacy to improved job meaningfulness and work–life balance, suggesting that understanding AI is increasingly a condition of maintaining agency at work (Abuassba et al. 2025).
- **Cultivate Agency in Human–AI Collaboration:** Strengthen critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and communication skills to engage credibly in decisions about AI use. Individuals who can articulate when AI supports or undermines their work are better positioned to influence deployment outcomes rather than experience them as imposed (Ryan 2022; Karahanna et al. 2024).
- **Use AI to Actively Shape Meaningful Work:** Approach AI not as a fixed external constraint but as a tool that can be leveraged to redesign tasks, reduce cognitive overload, and align work more closely with personal values. Evidence from research on work meaningfulness shows that when individuals experience control over how tools shape their work, effort and engagement increase, even in technologically intensive environments (Bergdahl et al. 2025).

Conclusion

If leaders embrace generative AI as a catalyst to redesign work around values that make us human—autonomy, competence, connection, and purpose—technological abundance can support deeper and more inclusive forms of meaningful work. When efficiency alone dominates, AI may deliver short-term output gains in some settings, but often at the cost of hollowing out engagement, trust, and long-term performance. Used wisely, generative AI has the potential not only to increase productivity but to elevate human capability by expanding learning, restoring agency, and enabling work that people experience as both effective and worthwhile.

The future of work in an AI-abundant economy will ultimately be shaped by the values, institutions, and choices that govern its use, and by whether leaders, policymakers, and individuals choose to deploy AI in service of lives that are genuinely worth living. Those who deploy AI in ways that strengthen autonomy, transparency, and human development will not only sustain performance but also build the legitimacy and trust on which long-term success ultimately depends.

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The Ostrom Project

Reimagining digital commons governance

Explores collective stewardship models for emerging digital systems. Drawing on principles of shared resource governance, it develops frameworks for sustainable digital infrastructure and cooperative system design.

ANER-G

Energy systems innovation

Focuses on decentralized infrastructure, programmable energy markets, and next-generation grid integration. It addresses the structural evolution of energy systems within digital and blockchain-enabled environments.

Africa Coalition

Continental coordination for strategic sectors

Convening leaders across energy, infrastructure, finance, health innovation, education, and future capabilities, the Coalition creates structured engagement pathways for continental collaboration.

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