

INNOVATION BRIEF

The Post-Work Era

How AI and adaptability will help unlock
the meaningful work of the future



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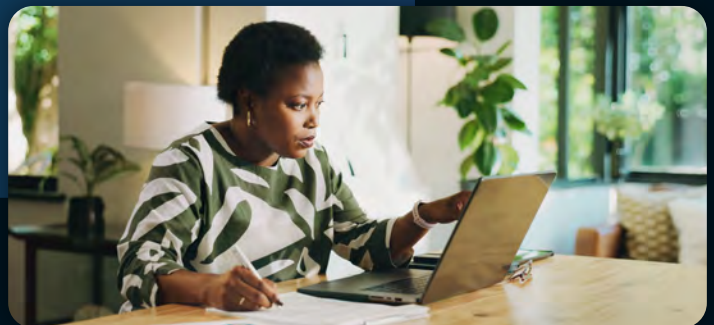
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How AI and adaptability will help unlock the meaningful work of the future

Summary

- The Post-Work Era is the evolution of the “Future of Work”—a shift from task-driven roles toward AI-enabled environments where adaptability is the defining human skill.
- Organizations that thrive will promote adaptable workers, work, and workplaces to help future-proof themselves and amplify human potential.
- Future-focused businesses will recognize the strategic value in promoting adaptability and take steps to treat AI as a creative partner to unlock more meaningful work and build more resilient, thriving companies.



In today's work environment, many knowledge workers find themselves drowning before they even start the day. They log into their always-on device and are immediately hit with a wall of noise: dozens of unread emails, conflicting priorities from scattered systems, calendar invites layered back-to-back, each demanding context switching and urgency. There's little space for clarity—just an inbox of obligations and a clock that feels like it's always running out. And if they're lucky, maybe they can carve out 45 minutes between Zoom calls to actually do the job they were hired to do.

This is not just inconvenient—it's unsustainable. The knowledge worker's reality today is one of constant interruption, tool fatigue, and invisible burnout. Workflows are fragmented across platforms, collaboration is shallow and reactive, and decisions are rushed rather than reasoned.

Meanwhile, the demands of the job evolve faster than the skills required to meet them, leaving people stretched thin and increasingly unsure where they still add value. Many aren't just asking how to be more productive. They're asking, quietly, “Am I still relevant?”

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The Post-Work Era is about redefinition, moving from managing tasks to orchestrating intelligence. It's a transition from digital overload to AI-enabled flow, where systems anticipate needs, amplify human strengths, and unlock new ways of working.

AI adds a new layer of complexity. When poorly implemented, it threatens to automate tasks without elevating talent. But that's only part of the story. The greater opportunity lies in using AI to enable people, not replace them. When applied with intention, AI becomes a force for clarity, creativity, and scale.

This shift defines the Post-Work Era. If the “Future of Work” was about digitization, the Post-Work Era is about redefinition, moving from managing tasks to orchestrating intelligence. It's a transition from digital overload to AI-enabled flow, where systems anticipate needs, amplify human strengths, and unlock new ways of working.

In this era, the most resilient organizations—and people—will treat adaptability not as an afterthought, but as a core capability. AI won't eliminate human effort. It will amplify human ingenuity, freeing knowledge workers to solve problems, imagine boldly, and create value that machines alone can't.





AI: from disruption to enablement

Knowledge work has evolved dramatically over the last century. In the industrial era, it was largely routine administrative and clerical tasks. It transformed again during the information revolution, and it's now characterized by specialized skills, analytical thinking, and digital proficiency.

The late 20th century introduced computers, the internet, and globalization—dramatically increasing the speed and volume of information that knowledge workers handled. The 21st century brought mobile computing, cloud technologies, and collaboration platforms, further reshaping work into highly interconnected and continuously shifting roles. Now, AI is set to

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The task for today's leaders is clear: integrate AI not as a threat but as a partner. The disruptions to work can be powerfully offset by the transformation of work itself.

transform knowledge work once again.

The IMF estimates that “almost 40 percent of global employment will be exposed to AI,”¹ meaning large portions of job tasks could be either automated or enhanced by intelligent



systems. In some cases, AI may complement workers by promoting productivity, decision-making, and creativity. In others, it may substitute parts of the role altogether, reducing demand for human input, lowering wages, or even making certain positions obsolete. This dual dynamic makes AI exposure a critical—and uneven—force shaping the future of global labor. Goldman Sachs predicts that approximately 300 million jobs globally may be exposed to automation due to AI advances.²

Even with these estimates showing widespread AI jobs disruption, companies are showing less than stellar readiness. For example, ServiceNow and Oxford Economics' "Enterprise AI Maturity Index" found that the average AI maturity score dropped nine points from last year's level. This suggests that either enterprises have actually receded in functionality adoption, or they have realized what seemed mature last year now feels behind, given swiftly expanding AI capabilities and use cases.³

These figures are undeniably stark, painting an anxious picture for both leaders guiding the next-generation workforce and employees relying on clear and confident direction. However, history reminds us that technology's advancement, while disruptive, frequently creates new pathways for employment, innovation, and growth.

The task for today's leaders is clear: integrate

AI not as a threat but as a partner. The disruptions to work can be powerfully offset by the transformation of work itself. In the Post-Work Era, the organizations that thrive will be those that treat adaptability as a foundation and turn AI from a source of friction into a force of enablement across work, workers, and workplaces.

1. Workers

In the Post-Work Era, one skill rises above the rest: adaptability. As the World Economic Forum highlights in its "Future of Jobs Report 2025," adaptability—alongside resilience and flexibility—will be among the most critical core skills by 2030.⁴



These qualities are expected to increase in both relevance and demand across nearly every industry. While technical proficiency will always matter, an adaptive mindset will allow people to navigate the shifting roles, responsibilities, and

technologies that will truly define workplace resilience in the Post-Work Era.

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This is what adaptability looks like in practice: a workforce empowered to navigate complexity, respond to change, and build value in ways that static org charts never allowed.

The traditional notion of a job—a fixed set of responsibilities—is dissolving. We're moving toward a dynamic model where skills matter more than titles, and projects evolve fluidly across teams and timelines.

Ian Beacraft, CEO of Signal and Cipher, is one of the leading futurists helping organizations navigate the intersection of emerging technologies and human adaptability. Beacraft captured this shift succinctly during his SXSW keynote as moving from “I am what I know” to “I am how I adapt.” To thrive in this environment, organizations must create—and workers must embrace—a culture of agility, where the norm is “surge skilling,” including learning quickly, applying rapidly, and adapting continuously.



But here's the urgent truth: this shift isn't theoretical—it's already underway. Every knowledge worker is on the verge of becoming an orchestrator of AI agents, responsible for coordinating intelligent systems across tasks, tools, and teams. On the horizon, digital coworkers are emerging in the form of AI agents with horizontal responsibilities that cut across business units.

So, whose job is it to lead this evolution? It's not just IT's mandate. This is a cross-functional, strategic responsibility that touches the entire C-suite and must be embedded across leadership layers. Organizations like Bayer are already embracing structural change through a customer-centric operating model called Dynamic Shared Ownership (DSO).⁵

Under DSO, Bayer is reducing hierarchical layers

and redistributing decision-making authority to cross-functional teams sitting closest to the customer. Rather than tightly defined roles reporting up through layers of management, teams are given greater autonomy to own outcomes and respond in real time, which frees up leadership from gatekeeping and accelerates responsiveness. This model flattens the org to make it "leaner, faster, and more productive," while enabling talent to flow toward the highest-impact work as priorities shift.⁶

This model has a powerful implication: every employee now owns their relationship with AI. It's no longer an IT-managed tool—it's a daily productivity partner. Workers aren't just executing tasks; they're orchestrating agents, surfacing insights, and making faster, more informed decisions.

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2. Work

Adaptability isn't just a trait for individuals—it must be embedded in how work itself evolves. Today's knowledge workers are often buried in fragmented tools, legacy processes, and an unending stream of notifications. These systems, meant to increase productivity, often disrupt it. Information overload, shifting priorities, and tech fatigue create a work environment that's reactive rather than creative.

for more strategic, human-centric work drawing on creativity, empathy, and judgment. AI is moving beyond automation toward intelligence amplification, fundamentally reshaping how work flows and where humans add value.



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This is the Post-Work frontier: not replacing jobs, but reimagining the work within them.

But when workers embrace new AI tools, they unlock space to think, solve, and imagine. Platforms like ChatGPT and automation engines can now handle repetitive tasks, freeing up time

This is the Post-Work frontier: not replacing jobs, but reimagining the work within them.

Bernard Marr, a globally recognized futurist and bestselling author known for translating complex technologies into practical business insights, reminds us that AI might be able to analyze a million customer reviews, but it still can't truly understand how a product makes us feel.⁷

While AI's current state is enhancing productivity and enriching our tasks, we're still primarily performing the same jobs as before, just with digital agents aiding us. The true potential of AI emerges when individuals shift from doing familiar tasks to exploring entirely

new capabilities previously thought unattainable, like early detection of diseases or individualized higher education.⁸

At the 2025 HIMSS healthcare conference, leading minds emphasized groundbreaking uses of AI for early disease detection. AI systems now analyze medical images and patient data to detect conditions like cancer, heart disease, and neurological disorders at preliminary stages—often before symptoms manifest.

For instance, AI models like DeepMind have demonstrated superior accuracy in diagnosing eye diseases from scans compared to human physicians, significantly improving early intervention outcomes.⁹ With these new capabilities, human physicians can devote more time to personalized patient care and developing new approaches to healthcare delivery.

In education, AI-driven personalized learning tools can offer content tailored precisely to individual students' needs, creating highly customized educational experiences. Platforms like Duolingo leverage AI to dynamically adjust lessons to match learner proficiency, while AI tutors deliver individualized support. Imagine the potential if every higher education student or employee received personalized learning plans precisely calibrated to their optimal learning styles, unlocking unprecedented potential and learning. In the Post-Work Era, AI



will help open new levels of knowledge work that will enhance creativity and provide meaning for humans.

3. Workplace

If workers and their work must adapt to the AI world, the places they do their work must also follow suit. Despite the recent wave of return-to-office (RTO) mandates, employee demand for flexibility and personalized work experiences remains high. And for good reason: a 2024 ResumeBuilder survey revealed that eight in 10 employers lost talent to RTO mandates.¹⁰ Rather than boost productivity, these policies have sparked friction, diminished trust, and created a culture of performative presence over genuine output.

Some organizations are using RTO mandates as veiled strategies to trigger voluntary attrition—what some call “back-channel layoffs.”¹¹ A quarter of VP and C-suite leaders admitted they hoped employees would quit once RTO was enforced.¹² The result? Declining morale, strained relationships, and measurable drops in employee happiness.¹³ A BambooHR

survey found that both remote and in-office employees spend roughly 76% of their workday on task, but in-office workers spend significantly

to fractured team dynamics.¹⁵ Bridging this divide requires an intentional approach to culture, collaboration, and inclusion. Digital equity means giving every employee—regardless of location—equal

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These aren't just workplace upgrades. They're strategic reimaginings that create spaces that respond to people, not just policies.

more time socializing.¹⁴

This moment presents a clear imperative: rebuild trust by rethinking what the workplace is for. Leading organizations now treat flexibility not as a perk, but as a core lever for performance, retention, and culture. That means designing around outcomes instead of presence, investing in equitable hybrid experiences, and creating spaces that support intentional collaboration.

Hybrid and remote workers often feel disconnected from their in-office peers, contributing



access to opportunity, mentorship, visibility, and advancement.

The companies leading this shift aren't trying to revive old office norms. They're asking better questions:

- How do we adapt our workspaces to enhance work and workers?
- How do we create belonging across time zones?
- How do we drive productivity without proximity?
- How do we make physical space a place people want to be, not have to be?

So, what do AI-enabled, adaptive workplaces look like in action?

Dropbox has gone “virtual first,”¹⁶ redesigning its offices into Dropbox Studios that serve as collaboration hubs for moments that benefit from in-person presence, like onboarding or strategic planning. They've also shifted to asynchronous workflows, cutting meeting fatigue and giving people more control over their time, without sacrificing engagement or output.

Accenture, meanwhile, uses digital twin simulations to prototype and optimize its workspaces.¹⁷ These models mirror real-time office behavior and help the company test how

design affects team dynamics, collaboration, and energy use. The result: offices that evolve with their people by being more responsive, dynamic, and data-informed.

These aren't just workplace upgrades. They're strategic reimaginings that create spaces that respond to people, not just policies. In the Post-Work Era, that's what it takes to attract and retain top talent, foster innovation, and create environments where adaptability and AI can thrive together.



What if the future isn't remote or in-office, but context-aware—where people move seamlessly between spaces designed to amplify their best work?

Imagine walking into a workspace that already knows what kind of day you're about to have, not because you told it, but because it's been learning with you. Your calendar signals deep

focus time, so the room dims, soundscapes shift to a mode that helps you drop in, and your most-used apps surface in your field of vision via smart glasses, already filtered for what matters most.

Your digital workspace doesn't just react—it anticipates. It connects you to an internal thought partner halfway across the globe who's been exploring a similar idea and suggests a co-pilot agent trained in both your work histories to fast-track your collaboration. While you're whiteboarding with them in an immersive mixed-reality session, the system captures and clusters ideas in real time, prompting pathways to explore based on relevant research from across the organization, or even from regulatory trends you've flagged in the past.

This isn't an office that houses work. It's one that activates it. It's a dynamic environment where intelligent systems, spatial design, and human connection converge to expand the boundaries of what you thought you could do. It's not just a place to be productive, but a place that makes you more *capable*.

Adaptability = future-proofing

Adaptability isn't just a response to change—it's a strategy for shaping it. It unlocks AI's potential, empowers people, and transforms work into something more creative, dynamic, and aligned to purpose.

What happens when organizations make

adaptability a priority across workers, work, and workplaces?

For workers, it means people don't just survive disruption; they lead through it. Adaptable

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Adaptability isn't a soft skill; it's a structural strength. It's what lets organizations navigate uncertainty, meet rising expectations, and stay ready for what's next.

cultures retain top talent, move faster, and scale innovation by making change less reactive and more routine.

For work, it reshapes how value is created. AI takes on repetitive tasks, freeing humans to focus on problem-solving, relationship-building, and creative judgment. In AI-enabled environments, ideas surface faster, silos fall, and insights travel further, turning workflows into engines of discovery, not just delivery.

For workplaces, this means designing environments that flex with people, both digitally and physically. Offices become

destinations for creativity and connection. Tools remove friction instead of adding it. Most importantly, adaptability builds trust. When employees see that leadership values outcomes over visibility, they respond with creativity, loyalty, and energy.

In short, adaptability isn't a soft skill; it's a structural strength. It's what lets organizations navigate uncertainty, meet rising expectations, and stay ready for what's next.

How to promote meaningful work in the Post-Work Era

Future-focused organizations see adaptability not as a soft skill, but as infrastructure that is critical to scaling innovation, retaining talent, and unlocking the full potential of AI. Here are four ways to cultivate it across your workforce:

1. Treat adaptability as a strategic skill and invest in tools that make learning and skilling fluid.

You've likely heard about skills-based hiring, the gig economy, and the rise of flexible work. While platforms like Uber, TaskRabbit, and Upwork have made task-based work accessible in our personal lives, the integration of such microtrends into mainstream enterprise workforce strategies is still catching up.



Whether or not your organization has formally mapped out skills by role, there's strategic value in doing so, particularly when determining which capabilities are ripe for automation and which remain inherently human. The future-ready workforce isn't just about tech adoption; it's about identifying which human skills to amplify and which routine elements to automate.

2. Use AI not to replicate human work, but to reimagine it.

AI isn't here just to help us do the same work faster. It's here to help us imagine entirely new kinds of work. When we treat AI as a creative partner rather than a productivity crutch, we unlock workflows and possibilities that simply didn't exist before.

AI can connect dots humans didn't see, generate starting points that spark innovation, and surface insights that accelerate big ideas. Whether it's recommending partnerships, suggesting new products, or surfacing novel solutions to customer challenges, AI gives us the space to think differently—and more ambitiously—about what's possible.

3. Redesign workplaces (physical and digital) with intentionality—where presence is earned, not mandated.

When it comes to your workplace, design for flexibility, not uniformity. Give teams the autonomy to choose how, where, and when they work best. Reimagine your office not as a place for badge swipes but as a destination for connection, creativity, and community. And use data to iterate. Track how your spaces are used and how your people are working, and adapt quickly based on real behavior, not assumptions.

Ultimately, flexibility done right isn't just about location. It's about creating a workplace rooted in trust, clarity, and empowerment. The most

forward-thinking companies aren't mandating a return to the office. They're designing environments where people want to show up—because the work, and the experience, are worth it.



4. Most importantly, imagine boldly. The future of work isn't just arriving—it's being authored, and the reader is holding the pen.

Too often, conversations about AI and the future of work are framed around fear: what will be lost, what might break, who might get left behind. But what if we reframe that? What if the Post-Work Era is an invitation to design something better? Bold organizations don't just adopt new tech; they architect new ways of creating meaning, connection, and value.

Now is the moment to reimagine what a workday can feel like, what career paths can look like, and how technology can help people thrive, not just function. And in doing so, we're exercising the very muscle that will define this era: adaptability. Every bold act of reinvention sharpens our ability to navigate what's next and makes us more prepared for the future.



An adaptable framework

In the Post-Work Era, adaptability isn't just about individual capability—it's about how organizations are structured to unlock it. While many companies focus on encouraging employees to use AI, few have redesigned their operating models to empower people *through* AI. This requires not just tool adoption, but clarity on how work gets done, by whom, and with what level of augmentation.

To simplify this complexity, it is helpful to focus on an actionable lens: a model built around three core roles every company has—building, selling, and servicing. This structure cuts across traditional silos and hierarchy, creating a shared foundation for AI readiness and transformation. As referenced earlier, Bayer is leading the charge here, flattening management layers and empowering cross-functional teams to move closer to the customer through its Dynamic Shared Ownership model.

The following future of work AI Maturity Framework helps organizations assess how these three essential roles evolve from hesitant and tool-curious to fully AI-native. Bring this to your AI Center of Excellence, a steering committee, or a leadership offsite. Use it to spark dialogue about how AI isn't just a tech strategy; it's an operating model.

AI readiness in the Post-Work Era: a maturity framework

Org role	Foundational (Not yet AI-ready)	Capable (AI-aware, but limited scope)	Evolving (AI-augmented, process-aware)	AI-native (Future-focused)
Building roles (e.g., engineering, product, design)	Uses AI skeptically, if at all. Lacks governance or confidence in outputs. No structured exploration of AI use cases.	Uses tools like ChatGPT or Copilot for drafting or troubleshooting. Team members understand prompting and basic validation.	Integrates LLMs into dev cycles. Tests and chains tools like Claude, Cursor, and Perplexity. Establishes “human-in-the-loop” for iteration.	Builds AI-native products. Launches internal AI agents for dev support. Establishes cross-functional “AI architecture” discipline.
Selling roles (e.g., marketing, sales, partnerships)	Sees AI as a risk to brand or control. Uses templated assets and intuition-led outreach. Little experimentation.	Uses AI to draft campaigns, summarize calls, or write outreach emails. Beginning to document best prompts.	Runs targeted A/B tests with AI-generated messaging. Leverages AI to surface segment insights and customer intent signals.	Deploys multi-agent workflows for campaign orchestration. Sales uses agents for discovery, opportunity scoring, and proactive next-best actions.
Servicing roles (e.g., support, success, ops)	Avoids automation due to fear of errors. Relies on tribal knowledge and manual triage. No metrics around response quality or time.	Uses GenAI to summarize tickets, suggest replies, or auto-tag CRM entries. Support teams explore LLM copilots.	Runs triage workflows with ServiceNow and LLMs. Uses AI to detect tone, route intelligently, and summarize across systems.	Deploys autonomous agents to resolve common requests. Staff shifts focus to relationship and lifecycle advisory. Proactive nudges based on AI-detected risk.

Adaptability: the new core skillset

Let's return to that knowledge worker who was logging into a dozen apps, shuffling meetings, juggling inboxes, and carving out slivers of time to do meaningful work. Now, imagine them in the Post-Work Era, where AI and adaptability in workers, work, and workplaces are paramount.

Their always-on device is no longer a distraction, but a silent co-pilot—perhaps integrated into smart eyewear or a lapel pin—feeding them only the insights they need, when they need them. Their productivity agent has already triaged their inbox, responded to non-essentials, and drafted high-quality responses for review, complete with research-backed references.

As they prepare for the day, their autonomous vehicle sends a soft chime: it's pulling up in 15 minutes, outfitted with a quiet pod for video collaboration. A digital assistant has already prepared their talking points for a cross-continental meeting en route.

When they arrive at the office, it's not just any office. It's been transformed into a customer-specific experience hub. The space welcomes them and their client with personalized colors, diet-specific catering, background music tied to shared preferences,

and even subtle scents designed to feel like home. The quarterly business review isn't just a meeting; it's a shared moment of connection, reflection, and strategy.



This is a world where humans and machines co-create value, where environments flex around purpose, and where work feels more human, not less.

Now that's a world of work where we would all love to both work and live.

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