

INNOVATION BRIEF

Work Reimagined

The human + AI blueprint for
exponential performance



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Summary

- AI's real risk lies in missed opportunity. Organizations that limit AI to automation forfeit exponential gains from human + AI collaboration.
- Promoting AI fluency for human employees will help develop the adaptable and creative workforce of tomorrow.
- Organizations must evolve from automation through augmentation to exponential outcomes that neither humans nor AI can achieve alone.
- Seven phases (define intent, map value, design roles, build fluency, pilot, scale governance, and optimize performance) provide an actionable roadmap toward unlocking value.
- The biggest barrier to AI transformation isn't technology but business leaders who aren't thinking beyond yesterday's standards.

The dominant narrative about AI and work is bleak. News headlines warn that AI will “wipe out jobs,”¹ cause a “white-collar bloodbath,”² and trigger an “AI-fueled jobpocalypse.”³

The warnings aren't mere speculation. IBM let 8,000 employees go in May 2025, mostly in HR, replacing approximately 200 roles with AI agents.⁴ BT Group announced plans to lay off 40,000 positions by 2030, while Amazon recently laid off 30,000 employees in the span of four months⁵ Many tech CEOs have come out publicly about the dangers and the need to confront these realities head-on.⁶ Gartner⁷ predicts that “at least 15% of day-to-day work decisions will be made

autonomously through agentic AI by 2028, up from 0% in 2024.”⁸

Left to their own devices, executives gravitate toward eliminating costs as AI's primary use case. If cost-cutting and automation are the priorities for C-suites, boards, investors, and shareholders, then AI will deliver those very well—and not much else.

While AI automation delivers efficiency gains and cost reductions, the real cost of automation-only strategies is the missed opportunity to achieve exponential performance or unlock entirely new forms of work that were previously impossible without



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AI's real promise isn't doing the same work cheaper; it's enabling entirely different work at entirely different scales.

human-AI collaboration. Companies using AI to scale yesterday's work at lower cost risk accelerating their own irrelevance as competitors reimagine workflows entirely.

Executive leadership coach Marshall Goldsmith famously said, “What got you here won't get you there.”⁹ AI embodies this paradox perfectly. Yes, your existing strengths, such as customer relationships, domain expertise, and operational discipline, remain valuable. But your existing playbook—hire more to scale, optimize incrementally, cut costs to survive—will hit a ceiling. AI's real promise isn't doing the same

work cheaper; it's enabling entirely different work at entirely different scales.

The opportunity (and the imperative) is augmentation over automation. When AI amplifies human capability rather than replacing it, organizations unlock what Goldsmith calls getting “there”: results that surpass what got you here. The evidence is compelling. AI-exposed industries see revenue per employee grow three times faster than less AI-ready sectors.¹⁰

This Innovation Brief outlines the human + AI blueprint for exponential performance: a framework for developing AI fluency, designing augmented roles, and building the organizational capabilities that turn AI into a strategic multiplier. The biggest barrier isn't technology; it's leaders not dreaming big enough to reimagine work beyond yesterday's standards.

Unlocking the potential of humans + AI

How can you shift from replacing humans to augmenting them with AI? Focus on two areas: building AI fluency across your workforce and deploying AI agents.



1. Human AI fluency

Goldsmith's expression, "what got you here, won't get you there,"¹¹ is equally applicable to your workforce thriving in an AI-driven era. While the productivity benefits of AI are already measurable, it's becoming apparent that human users of AI must evolve in order to drive the next era of work.

For example, speaking at the Forbes CIO Next Summit, Katya Andresen, SVP & Chief Digital and Analytics Officer at The Cigna Group, likened AI agents to "infinite interns" who are hardworking, fast, and always willing to

complete any task given to them—but with a huge caveat.¹² Andresen emphasized that while these AI interns are plentiful, tireless, and capable, they come with significant limitations:

- They require training. Like real interns, they need clear instructions and guidance.
- They are prompt-sensitive. If not directed properly, their output may be off or unexpected.
- They have short attention spans. They can forget earlier instructions or context in longer tasks.
- They're confident guessers. If they don't know something, they might fabricate a convincing answer.¹³

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From effectively managing AI agents to helping lead AI-driven business transformation, a crucial attribute emerging for human employees is AI fluency.

The key takeaway from Andresen's analogy is that human oversight is critical. Any effective use of AI requires an iterative, human-in-the-loop process supported by



training, interaction, management, and strong guardrails. From effectively managing AI agents to helping lead AI-driven business transformation, a crucial attribute emerging for human employees is AI fluency.

When employees effectively use AI, they are the “pilot,” steering “AI to enhance creativity and precision.”¹⁴ In contrast, employees who lack AI fluency may sit back and act as a “passenger,” letting “AI to do the work for them” and flooding “inboxes with ‘workslop’: long-winded, low-value content that looks polished but adds little substance.”¹⁵ AI pilots can be enormously valuable. MIT research found that generative AI tools increased professional writing speed by 40%, allowing knowledge workers to accelerate content creation while maintaining quality

standards.¹⁶ An internal BCG experiment involving approximately 750 employee participants corroborates the finding by demonstrating that generative AI delivered 30-40% efficiency gains for junior analysts and 20-30% gains for experienced staff when properly applied with appropriate oversight.¹⁷

But efficiency gains tell only part of the story. The MIT study showed that worker performance dropped by nearly 20 percent when AI was used outside the boundary of its capabilities,¹⁸ while the BCG research found that productivity decreased for complex tasks that involved correcting AI-generated outputs.¹⁹ In other words, human employees will actually be worse off with AI if they don’t know how to use it properly.

It's no surprise, then, that some companies are fostering AI fluency in their workforce. In April 2025, mandated AI usage served as a baseline expectation for all Shopify employees.²⁰ AI fluency became a performance metric, tracked in reviews and embedded across all workflows, from planning to prototyping to ideation. Using AI wasn't a bonus; it was now a core competency.

What made headlines was Shopify's new hiring policy. Managers must prove that AI can't do a job before filling it. This signals a shift from AI as a tool to AI as a teammate. The memo became a blueprint for building a leaner, AI-centric organization, intentionally designed around areas where humans add unique value by understanding when and how to use AI.

Several tech companies followed suit. Zapier published its own memo explaining how 89% of its workforce actively uses AI daily.²¹ Rather than treating AI as a cost-cutting tool, Zapier positioned it as a force multiplier, empowering employees to work more efficiently and creatively, forging a people-centered blueprint.

To drive adoption, Zapier paused regular work for a company-wide AI hackathon, allowing employees at all levels to experiment with tools and build automations for their daily work.²²

They followed up with internal groups to share use cases, AI adoption tracking, and sustained focus on embedding AI into workflows.

Zapier also announced that all new hires must be AI-fluent,²³ measuring fluency across four levels, from "Unacceptable: Resistant to AI tools" to "Transformative: Uses AI to rethink strategy and deliver user-facing value that wasn't possible two years ago,"²⁴ creating aspirational benchmarks on all employees' journey toward AI fluency.²⁵



Both companies are making AI fluency a measurable expectation. It's no longer just a skill—it's a performance benchmark that requires employees to demonstrate how they use AI to achieve better, faster, or more meaningful work. Research by BCG, Boston University, and OpenAI found that workers augmented with generative AI were 15 percentage points more likely to successfully

select and apply advanced machine-learning methods beyond their original skill set.²⁶ In short, being able to use AI allows workers to perform tasks that previously required specialists, expanding the scope of what each employee can contribute.

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Organizations that make AI fluency measurable and embed it in daily work are not reacting to change but actively defining the future of work.

As these examples suggest, we're seeing a new standard for employee + AI empowerment:

- **Make AI adoption real, not theoretical:** By turning AI fluency into a behavior-based framework, these companies avoid vague mandates and instead establish a baseline and create tangible expectations.
- **Democratize AI innovation:** The model empowers employees at all levels to contribute to AI transformation.
- **Reduce fear and increase confidence:** Employees learn what “good” looks like at each level, which encourages safe experimentation and learning.
- **Align performance with future-proofed skills:** By embedding AI into feedback, AI-native companies incentivize continuous improvement, ensuring AI becomes a natural part of daily work.

The shift from AI as an optional tool to an essential teammate redefines workplace competency. Human value isn't diminished but amplified through strategic AI partnership. Organizations that make AI fluency measurable and embed it in daily work are not reacting to change but actively defining the future of work. This cultivates top talent, accelerates performance, and shapes industry leadership.

2. Human + AI agent augmentation

Your company's next new hires may be digital, not human. According to the Microsoft 2025 Work Trend Index Annual Report, “82% of leaders say they're confident that they'll use digital labor to expand workforce capacity in the next 12–18 months.”²⁷ As employees grow more fluent with AI, organizations will build stronger foundations for employees to work with and manage AI agents. To unlock exponential potential, they'll need to think strategically about how to elevate human workers freed up by agents.

The evidence is compelling. A field experiment involving 776 Procter & Gamble professionals found that individuals working with AI achieved the same performance as two-person teams without AI, producing the same quality outcomes that previously required human collaboration.²⁸



AI agents are fundamentally reshaping assumptions about team structure and capacity by joining workforces. Skills and capabilities will evolve in stages:

- **Stage 1:** Humans are already leveling up to work with AI assistants.
- **Stage 2:** Agents will join as digital colleagues, automating repetitive tasks. This phase will evolve as AI agents become more capable, partnering with human counterparts to execute at human direction toward collaborative outcomes.
- **Stage 3:** Humans will direct agents to execute processes and workflows, orchestrated through an AI control tower.
- **Stage 4:** Agents will learn to work with other agents to complete tasks, optimize workflows, and suggest upgrades to workflows, systems, and potential outcomes, managed by human orchestrators. As these agents evolve, multimodal inputs will further expand how they work. They'll start to "see" and "hear" inputs, evolving how agents perceive their work and deliver outcomes.
- **Stage 5+:** As AI advances, future phases will model around AI agents performing specific tasks managed by a master AI agent to achieve desired results. Eventually, digital employees, capable of executing multiple tasks, enter the mix to complement AI agents for greater output potential.

What's missing is the same effort applied to redesigning human roles. As agents grow more capable, human work must evolve with them. Organizations need to answer: what work remains uniquely human, and what new roles emerge as agents take on more tasks?

In each phase of AI agent evolution, ask:

- What is the human's role in this phase?
- What skills are required or developed?
- What new roles are created?

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Instead of asking “What jobs can AI agents replace?” ask “What value-generating roles now exist because AI agents are available?”

While comprehensive data is still emerging, early signals suggest automation-only strategies are unsustainable. A Visier study found a “layoff boomerang” where fired

employees are rehired.²⁹ Andrea Derler, a principal at Visier, notes that many executives haven't had time to assess what AI can actually do and at what cost, versus which tasks can't



be replaced. Finance startup Klarna reduced its workforce by 22% in 2024 to ramp up AI agents, then reversed course to rehire humans, admitting that cost motivations had overridden service quality.³⁰

More significantly, IBM's CEO revealed that despite 8,000 HR layoffs for AI automation, the company's overall employment actually increased as cost savings were redirected to engineering, sales, and product development roles.³¹ This pattern of automating commodity work to reinvest in strategic talent represents a more sustainable model.

Gartner® predicts that “Over 40% of agentic AI projects will be canceled by the end of 2027, due to escalating costs, unclear business value, or inadequate risk controls.”³² Many organizations are about to discover that replacing humans with AI is significantly harder than anticipated, not because AI doesn’t work, but because few jobs are fully replaceable and effective AI deployment requires human orchestration, continuous refinement, and strategic leadership.

How will you avoid the costly “automate-first-and-boomerang” detour? A shift from replacement to augmentation is needed. If AI agents are “infinite interns,” they should unlock new work, not just take over existing jobs. Instead of asking “What jobs can AI agents replace?” ask “What value-generating roles now exist because AI agents are available?”

Here are three keys to making this shift:

1. Treat AI as a cost-cutting and productivity tool and as an opportunity amplifier.

Interns (AI agents) can handle tasks that were once too expensive, too time-consuming, or too complex for humans to focus on. This frees people to innovate and explore new roles.

2. Expand efforts from automation to exploration.

Agents can simulate, test, explore, and iterate at scale, and they’ll only become more capable. Assign them exploratory roles, such as:

- Trendcasting in real time across millions of data points

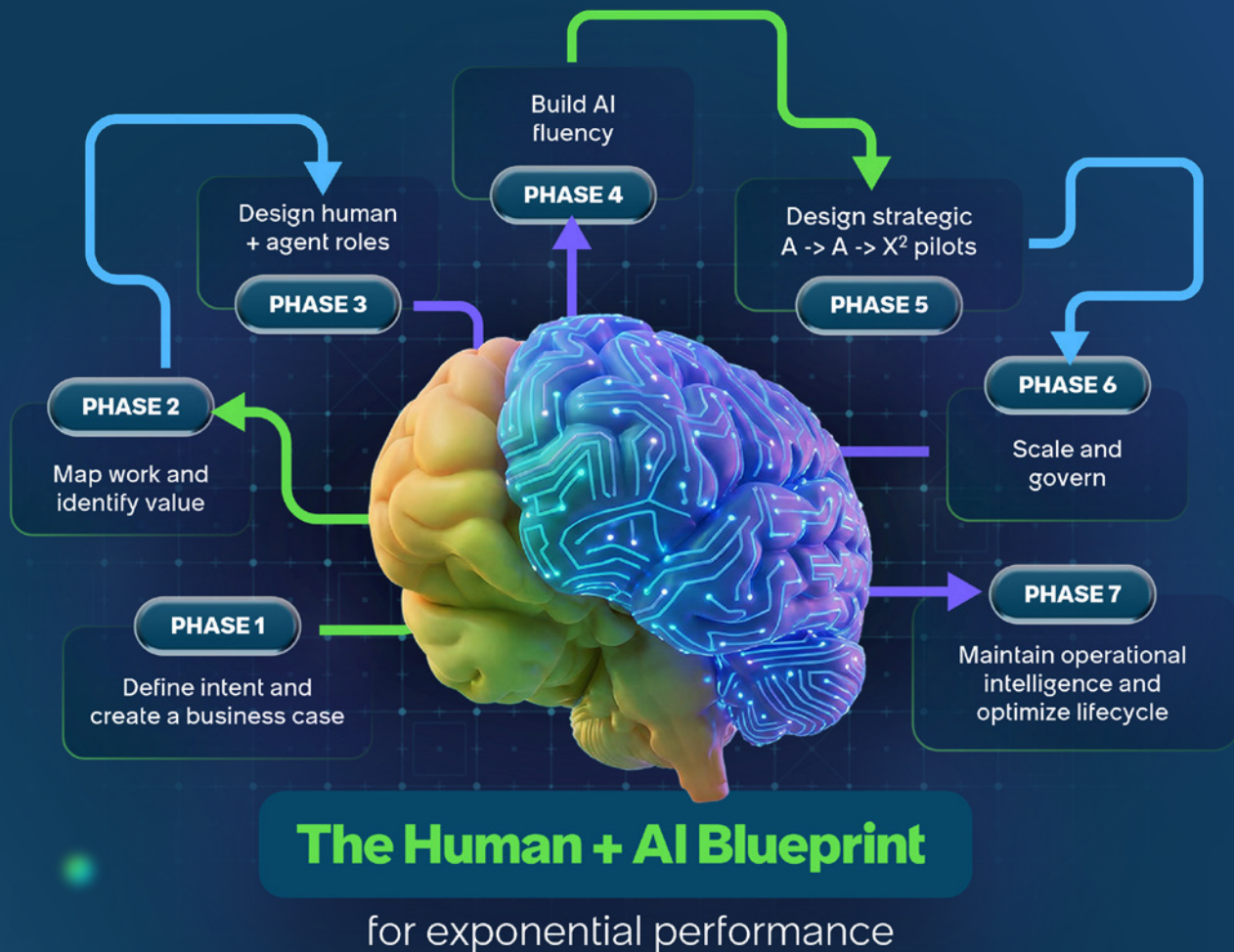
- Synthesizing customer sentiment to unlock hidden needs
- Generating new product ideas based on untapped data
- Auditing internal processes for friction that humans overlook

3. Analyze known processes to surface emergent potential.

Use agents to map whitespace. Consider exploring:

- Which workflows exist between teams that no one owns?
- What information do customers need but never request?
- Where could decisions be made faster if agents summarized and pre-decided?

This approach moves beyond asking “How can AI do what we already do, but cheaper and faster?” to asking “What can we now do thanks to AI that we never had the bandwidth, budget, or imagination for before?” Thinking strategically about humans and AI together unlocks previously unimaginable opportunities.



The human + AI blueprint for exponential performance

AI's greatest promise lies in the untapped human capacity it can empower. When we pair intelligent agents with purpose-driven people, productivity curves bend upward, creativity accelerates, and entirely new sources of value emerge.

This framework, automation → augmentation → exponential performance (A → A → X²), helps you explore how to invest in automation and

augmentation to unlock exponential outcomes. It's designed to inspire new ways to reskill talent, redesign workflows, and innovate.

Use the six actions below to develop your blueprint for exponential outcomes. Each step compounds the next, building intent, capacity, and culture so AI becomes a flywheel for exponential performance. The end result: a roadmap that articulates your vision, validates new skills, and prepares your workforce to capture value previously impossible for humans or machines alone.

Phase 1: Define intent and create a business case.

Draft a one-page “AI Purpose” manifesto that answers: Why AI + people? Why automation + augmentation? Why now? Explore how to create new value, not just eliminate roles.



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As competitors explore augmented AI, organizations that are content with automation may accelerate their own irrelevance and obsolescence.

Your core business model, customer relationships, and institutional knowledge remain valuable. AI doesn't erase what made you successful; it amplifies it. Yet your existing playbook—hire more people to scale, optimize current processes incrementally, then downsize to cut costs—will eventually hit a ceiling. Competitors using AI to fundamentally transform workflows will outpace you.

Right now, most executives are automating tomorrow's businesses based on yesterday's standards of success because “it's what got them here.” But doing so doesn't future-proof tomorrow's companies; these decisions create an AI status quo. If companies solely use AI to scale yesterday's work, organizations will get stuck in a rut of stifled innovation. As competitors explore augmented AI, organizations that are content with automation may accelerate their own irrelevance and obsolescence.

To avoid these risks, rethink business-as-usual approaches that focus on efficiency gains, cost reduction, and machine-driven job displacement. Instead, shift your mindset to value creation powered by the unprecedented capacity of AI to augment human capability during this unparalleled era of productivity, growth, and performance. This evolution in thinking takes intent and strategies to confront business pressures.



CFOs face quarterly earnings targets. Boards demand immediate cost reductions. Competitors are cutting headcount and claiming efficiency gains. Leaders with the intent and commitment to augment with AI can build the business case by:

- **Pursuing a bimodal approach:**³³ Focus on using AI to improve existing operations and free up resources, while channeling those gains into innovation and growth through new products, services, and business models.
- **Championing quick wins:** Use 90-day pilots (Phase 5 of the human + AI blueprint) to demonstrate ROI, then scale systematically rather than betting everything at once.
- **Repositioning metrics:** Shift board conversations from headcount reduction to revenue per employee. PwC's 2025 Global AI Jobs Barometer found that AI-exposed

industries saw revenue per employee jump threefold over less AI-ready sectors.³⁴

- **Reframing the timeline:** Present augmentation as a longer-term investment with measurable milestones. When studied over a three-year horizon, AI leaders delivered 60% higher returns to shareholders according to BCG.³⁵

Sample questions to ask:

- What business outcome is currently impossible that AI could unlock within 12 months?
- Where will we reinvest every hour saved by automation?
- Which stakeholders must sign the "AI Purpose" manifesto to signal shared intent?

Phase 2: Map work and identify value.

Before deploying automation or AI agents, clarify which activities require human attention and which can be delegated to machines. This exercise maps recurring tasks against two questions:

1. **Work:** How frequently does the activity occur and how much capacity does it consume (hours, handoffs, bottlenecks)?
2. **Value:** How much unique human value, creativity, judgment, and trust does it generate for the business?

Once you understand the work and value, you can strategically deploy human and AI resources:

	High strategic/ human value	Low strategic/ value
High repetition/ effort	Augment Pair people with agents to augment speed and insight	Automate Delegate to machines
Low repetition/ effort	Protect and enhance Maintain human leadership but empower with AI	Eliminate/ simplify Retire, consolidate

Force-fitting work into clean categories might be challenging when reality is more ambiguous. Automated processes that require constant human intervention or augmented workflows where AI sits unused might signal a need for adjustment.

Much of knowledge work might fall into the gray territory of medium repetition and medium value. It will require comparative and continuous pilots to test the same workflow with three approaches (fully manual baseline, AI-only automation, and human-and-AI augmentation) and holistic measurements that go beyond speed and cost to look at quality, employee satisfaction, and customer impact. Some tasks will reveal themselves as more automatable than expected, while others will prove they need human judgment you didn't initially appreciate.

Phase 3: Design human + agent roles.

For roles ripe for AI augmentation, write a future job description pairing a person with one or more agents. Estimate the "human-to-AI ratio" for each role, a metric from the Microsoft Work Trend Index, which "optimizes the balance of human oversight with agent efficiency on human-agent teams" and asks, "How many agents are needed for which roles and tasks?" and "How many humans are needed to guide them?"³⁶ Also ask:

- Which KPIs will show that both the human and the agent are succeeding?
- Who are the stakeholders in IT, HR, and the business unit (BU)?
- What would a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed) chart look like that clarifies human versus agent accountability?

Phase 4: Build AI fluency.

Develop and launch an "AI Learning and Development Lab" for all employees to attend each week in place of non-essential meetings. Design tiers for advanced courses and maturity acceleration, and graduate employees from tier to tier.

Phase 5: Design strategic A → A → X2 pilots.

Select one AI agent lighthouse workflow pilot from Phase 2 in the automate and augment categories.



1. Integrate an agent, outline metrics, and run a 30-day A/B comparison against the old process.
2. Partner an agent with a person, outline metrics, and run a 30-day A/B comparison against the old process.

Consider tracking three key metrics: time saved, quality enhancement, and new capacity redeployed to higher-value work. Report performance and value to stakeholders.

Phase 6: Scale and govern.

Form a strategic alliance between IT and HR to create an AI Resources Office. This office owns agent role definition, onboarding, performance management, compliance, and ethics.

Phase 7: Maintain operational intelligence and optimize lifecycle.

Once AI agents are deployed, shift focus to performance. Agents should be managed, not installed and forgotten. Monitor, measure, and improve agent performance over time through a recurring orchestration and management system that assesses what's working, what's not, and where to optimize or retire agents. An AI control tower that affords a comprehensive, enterprise-wide view is essential. The goal is sustained value, accountability, and alignment with business outcomes.

Answer these questions

to start exploring possibilities beyond automation and cost reduction

Vision and strategy

- Who will define the vision for the future of work now, one year to 18 months from now?
- What can we do with unlocked time and capacity?
- What new revenue streams or products become possible with AI augmentation? Which problems can we now solve?

Workforce transformation

- How might we empower employees to work with AI to achieve tasks not possible before?
- Who will reskill employees individually and at scale?
- Who will envision future job descriptions?
- What are the specialized roles AI could play to complement human orchestrators in their work? How might we train against that specific knowledge to not just automate existing work, but augment it toward exponential outcomes?

AI agent deployment

- Who can identify repetitive but crucial (not human-dependent) tasks where AI agents can work as outcome accelerators alongside human AI orchestrators?
- How many agents are required to support automated and augmented roles once defined?
- Who will onboard, manage, and offboard AI agents?

Organizational design

- What if work were to shift from process-to outcome-driven work teams?
- What if organizational charts were assembled by missions, where AI agents were organized around a “talent cloud” to coordinate workforces around goals, projects, and outcomes?
- Who will reimagine success measures for AI + people?
- How will we ensure ethical AI deployment and maintain human accountability?



The human + AI future

The biggest barrier to scaling with AI isn't AI taking jobs; it's leaders not moving fast enough or dreaming big enough to transform work. The human + AI blueprint above offers a phased approach to lead from the front.

AI agents represent more than an automation opportunity for efficiency and cost savings. This is the moment to reimagine how businesses function at every level. Leaders must move beyond efficiency, thinking toward vision-led transformation, by adapting job descriptions, evolving workflows, and boldly reimagining how

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value is created, teams are structured, and technology deployed.

The stakes are real, but so is the opportunity. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs

Report 2025 reveals that while 92 million jobs will be displaced by 2030, 170 million new roles will be created: a net gain of 78 million jobs globally.³⁷ The critical question isn't whether jobs will exist, but how organizations will compete for talent and invest in reskilling their workforce for these emerging roles.

As AI agents evolve from tools into teammates, the organizations leading the next era will be those who see this as an opportunity to redefine work itself. It comes down to vision and intent. Viewing automation solely as cost-cutting is a legacy mindset. Trying to automate your way to innovation won't future-proof your organization; it will fossilize your business into obsolescence.

Augmented by intelligent systems, employees can become orchestrators, innovators, and decision-makers. But this happens by design, not default. Human + AI collaboration must be embedded into the organization's fabric.

Every executive now has the opportunity and responsibility to champion human-AI potential as a strategic advantage. Reskill the workforce, not just to enhance yesterday's jobs, but to execute tomorrow's possibilities. Embed AI agents to scale and improve workflows—and reimagine those workflows entirely. Rethink org charts, roles, and KPIs around what humans and AI uniquely achieve together.

History shows that every major technological leap ushers in either disruption or reinvention. The difference lies in leadership.



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The Innovation Office

The Innovation Office is the voice of future-focused innovation in ServiceNow. Our research, thought leadership, and co-innovation solutions serve as a blueprint for AI-first business transformation. We are a strategic partner with our colleagues and customers to ignite the “spark of the possible.”