The Future of Work

Six Forces Reshaping Talent Over the Next Decade

IFTF Institute for the Future | VALENCIACOLLEGE

About IFTF

Institute for the Future (IFTF) is the world's leading futures organization. For over 55 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight education and training to navigate complex change and develop future-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more equitable and sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California. iftf.org

About Valencia College

Founded in 1967, Valencia College serves more than 75,000 students annually, offering associate and bachelor's degrees, workforce training, certificates, and continuing education programs. Valencia is committed to providing high-quality, affordable education that helps students achieve their academic and career goals. Serving Orange and Osceola counties, the college creates pathways to opportunity while developing the talent that fuels Central Florida's workforce and economy. valenciacollege.edu

The research and analysis presented in this report were conducted by Institute for the Future (IFTF) for Valencia College. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the views, positions, or policies of the Universal Orlando Foundation or Valencia College.

Acknowledgments

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We are also deeply appreciative of the many individuals who contributed to this study through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Their insights, perspectives, and experiences were instrumental in shaping the findings presented in this report. Beyond informing the research itself, their contributions will help guide future planning and decision-making as Valencia continues to evaluate and strengthen programs that prepare students for careers across a broad range of industries.

Finally, we extend our gratitude to our current and prospective students, who inspire our work every day. Their aspirations, determination, and potential motivate our ongoing efforts to strengthen Valencia College and expand opportunities for the communities we serve. We are honored to support their educational journeys and the pursuit of their goals.

The authors of this report would like to thank all of the people who generously offered their time and expertise to provide insights reflected within: Valencia College leadership, workforce and industry leaders in Central Florida, and members of the Student Government Association.

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About this Project

PROJECT PROCESS

Valencia College partnered with Institute for the Future (IFTF) to produce this forecast. Over a period of eight months, IFTF researchers conducted desk research and collected signals of change, held an internal workshop with futures researchers, interviewed 11 college leaders and nine industry leaders in Central Florida about their views on the future of work and talent, and met with student leaders and deployed a student survey with their help. Valencia College also hosted four Employer Forum events with local leaders in arts, entertainment, and experiences; engineering, technology, and skilled trades; healthcare; and business and professional services. Their insights informed this report. IFTF researchers produced the forecast, incorporating feedback from the Valencia College team.

WHAT IS TALENT?

Talent refers to the workforce as a whole and the individuals within it who create value for an organization or employer. It is shaped by educational institutions, corporate and organizational cultures, and broader social, technological, economic, environmental, and political trends. The forces in this forecast suggest how talent — and the environment it exists within — could look different in 2036.

Executive Summary

This forecast, produced by Valencia College and Institute for the Future, explores six transformative future forces likely to reshape talent over the next decade. It is designed to help readers step into the future and begin to develop insights — and eventually determine actions they can take today and in the short- and medium-term to prepare for this future. The future forces are:

Always-on augmentation: From unaided human capability toward persistent AI dependence at work

By 2036, advanced AI systems are deeply embedded in daily work, enhancing productivity while creating new forms of dependence, standardization, and workplace tension. AI-native employees rely on continuous use of AI copilots for decision-making and communication, while employers use the same systems to monitor performance and optimize operations.

Proliferation of the chameleon worker: From job hopping toward career fluidity

By 2036, career advancement is defined less by specialization within a single field and more by repeated transitions across industries. Economic volatility and the rise of AI lead to a genuine shift toward skills-based hiring, pushing workers to continually recombine transferable skills, while modular "building block" degrees support rapid, ongoing reskilling. This shift expands opportunity and labor mobility but presents tradeoffs between adaptability and deep expertise.

Life beyond the ladder: From predictable economic paths toward individualized economic navigation

By 2036, most young people have given up on the idea that a college degree will automatically lead to a good job and financial stability. Rather than anchor their identity and self-worth in a stable profession, they see themselves as independent economic actors navigating a landscape of erratic social support and heightened risk. As a response, many game the economic system or opt out of it. For them, work is optimized, not maximized, and careers are more prone to starts and stops. Work is a means to an end, rather than a meaningful pursuit in and of itself.

The great professional inversion: From white-collar prestige toward human skills premiums

By 2036, advances in AI have reduced the scarcity and value of many technical and analytical white-collar skills, reshaping the professional hierarchy. As AI takes over some routine knowledge work, employers increasingly prize human capabilities such as effective communication, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. In a labor market defined by human interaction and AI coordination, interpersonal skills become essential economic assets rather than "soft" secondary traits.

Minding the machines: From machine-assisted humans toward human-assisted machines

By 2036, advances in robotics and AI have shifted many jobs from manual labor to supervising robots, in industries ranging from healthcare to agriculture. Employers value not only the work robots complete, but the labor data generated by human oversight, creating new economic opportunities but also ethical concerns around surveillance, ownership, and compensation. As automation expands, workers are increasingly — but unevenly — tasked with directing machines rather than doing the work themselves.

Degrees of efficiency: From liberal arts ideals toward colleges embedded in industry

By 2036, higher education is primarily oriented around workforce preparation and economic outcomes rather than broad intellectual development. Colleges and employers are deeply integrated, with industry-designed curricula and even pre-hiring arrangements aligning education directly to labor market needs. While this model improves career pathways and responsiveness to economic change, it narrows institutional independence and limits access to traditional liberal arts education.

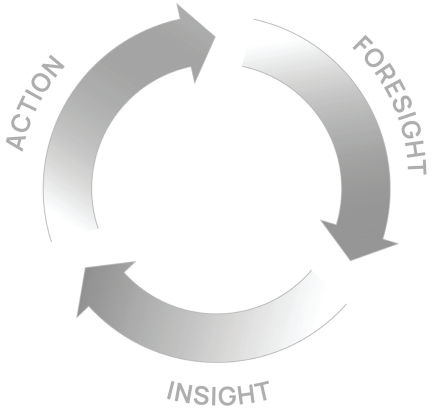
How to use this forecast

Practicing strategic foresight is an iterative process: Foresight leads to insight, which leads to action. This forecast is an example of foresight: a researched, plausible, and deliberately provocative vision of the future of work. Its purpose is to help Valencia College stakeholders develop insights about the future they can use to guide the actions they will take today and in the coming years to both shape and respond to a future that will look very different from today. Each future force is supported by **drivers** and **signals of change**:

- **Drivers of change** are major, underlying directions that will shape the future. They often have deep roots in historical patterns of change. Drivers can relate to shifts in a variety of realms, including society, technology, the economy, the environment, and politics.
- **Signals of change** are concrete observations about how the world is changing today. Signals are the evidence and "building blocks" used to create plausible, provocative forecasts about possible futures. They help us assess broader patterns and provide grounded detail about new and unexpected experiences, uses of technology, social interactions, shifting values, business models, etc.

This forecast is designed to help you step out of present-day thinking to imagine new ways of organizing work and understanding talent over the next decade. As you read, take time to digest each future force. Try your best not to contest it, but instead to place yourself within the world it describes. Then begin to develop your own insights by asking:

- How does this future force make me feel?
- What benefits might this future hold for me, my family, my community, or my organization?
- What challenges might it create for me, my family, my community, or my organization?
- What does this mean for me? Am I prepared? If not, how could I be better prepared?
- What does this mean for my organization? Is it prepared? If not, how could it be better prepared?



The BANI future

In *Navigating the Age of Chaos: A Sense-Making Guide to a BANI World That Doesn't Make Sense,* IFTF contributors Jamais Cascio and Bob Johansen, with co-author Angela F. Williams, argue that the future will be brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible — BANI. The framework is a useful lens for understanding the landscape in which the six future forces will play out, and the context in which leaders and individuals will have to make decisions.

BRITTLE: Brittle systems do not fail gracefully; they shatter. When something is brittle, it is susceptible to sudden and catastrophic collapse. Brittle things often look strong right up to the breaking point. Then, everything falls apart.

ANXIOUS: Anxiety carries with it a sense of helplessness, a fear that no matter what we choose to do, it will be the wrong choice. It ties closely to depression. In an anxious world, we are constantly waiting for the next disaster. Every decision feels potentially catastrophic, as likely to make things worse as to make them better.

NONLINEAR: In a nonlinear world, cause and effect are seemingly disconnected or disproportionate. Other systems may interfere or obscure the picture, or there may be hidden delays between a visible cause and its visible effect. Outcomes can end up wildly out of balance with the actions — or inactions — that produced them. Small decisions can have massive consequences, good or bad, while enormous effort can yield almost nothing.

INCOMPREHENSIBLE: "Incomprehensible" does not necessarily mean we cannot see what is happening — it means we struggle to understand *why* it is happening. We witness events and decisions that seem illogical or senseless, whether because their origins are too distant, too tangled to articulate, or simply too absurd. More information is no guarantee of better understanding; sometimes it deepens the confusion.

Six forces shaping the future of talent

01

Always-on augmentation:

From unaided human capability toward persistent AI dependence at work

In 2036, AI is reshaping how people think, work, and relate to each other on the job. A new class of more capable AI tools, coupled with the widespread adoption of enterprise AI platforms, makes employees faster and more confident — but also creates cognitive dependence and new sources of friction at work. While some have strong distaste for and even moral judgment about AI use, many new hires arrive having learned much of what they know with a team of continuous AI copilots at their side. These systems handle task prioritization, time management, drafting emails, and difficult conversations. They are not simply supporting workers; workers need them to solve problems, retrieve information, and talk to colleagues. AI, in effect, serves as a pervasive layer of cognitive and social scaffolding, standardizing professional behavior that used to vary widely from person to person.

These new ways of working are reshaping the workplace. AI natives — people who have grown up with AI — work confidently and quickly with AI programs that know every company policy and every technical manual and produce high-quality written and technical outputs. These workers are also more dependent on, connected to, and comfortable with their AI than with their human coworkers. Some of them are unwilling or unable to interact with colleagues or customers without AI assistance. Given the ongoing cultural, political, and economic debates over AI and its impact, the workplace of 2036 is rife with tension between heavily AI-augmented staff and the managers and coworkers who (by lack of access or interest) are not. How quickly tasks should be completed, how often other humans should be consulted, and whose judgment is more reliable are key flashpoints.

This dependence and tension is not limited to employees. Employers and their business models rely on AI as well. The same systems that augment workers also monitor them, tracking outputs, skill mastery, and communication patterns to generate continuous, high-resolution feedback that managers use to train people and refine operations.

SCENES FROM 2036

The dashboard at Sunshine Adventure

Marisol manages a team of 30 guest-facing staff members at Sunshine Adventure, Central Florida's newest theme park. This week has been particularly difficult. Temperatures have hit triple digits for the sixth day in a row, discouraging guests from visiting and fatiguing staff members. She decides to review the morning metrics for Hospitality Assist, the AI program the company supplies to all on-the-ground employees. Workers can choose to wear a pair of sunglasses or an ear piece that allows them to communicate with colleagues or with their AI agent. She opens the dashboard and immediately notices a trend of downward sloping graphs related to employee performance. Ride operators are working more slowly, and food staff are exhibiting higher-than-average "script drift" in guest interactions — the temperature is clearly wearing on them. Marisol immediately activates a Code Yellow. Every park employee gets a message to start enacting a heat protocol. Employees stationed outdoors immediately start rotating into 30-minute cooling breaks so that from air-conditioned rooms they can control and monitor cheerful robots that interact with guests outside. They also start filling robotic beverage coolers with ice, water bottles, mini ice pops, and cool cloths that are autonomously distributed to guests free of charge. Sunshine Adventure management had originally been nervous that guests would respond negatively to these periods of diminished human interaction, but guest surveys show high levels of appreciation for the cooling freebies. In addition, employees have called out 35% less frequently since the policy was introduced. Marisol is grateful for the insight she had into employee performance today — Hospitality Assist makes her job as manager easier.

SCENES FROM 2036

The empathy layer

Rina works in guest services at the Sunshine Grand Resort. Her shift is ending in 10 minutes, and she is excited to meet up with friends after work. Things have finally calmed down for the day, and she spends her final minutes reviewing a chat from Jules, a front-desk worker she finds particularly irritating.

JULES: Hey — flagging Room 1842. Guest sentiment trending negative after check-in. My copilot suggests a proactive upgrade + personalized apology to stabilize the experience curve.

RINA: Or you could just tell me what happened so I can address it.

JULES: They waited 11 minutes past the promise window. System predicts a 42% chance of complaint escalation if unaddressed.

RINA: 42%, huh? Did it also predict they were tired, holding two kids, and just wanted someone to acknowledge them?

JULES: Yes, actually. That's embedded in the empathy layer.

RINA: Right. Of course it is.

JULES: Look, I can deploy the recovery package now. It's optimized — late checkout, dining credit, tone-calibrated message. Fastest path to resolution.

RINA: Fastest isn't always best. And I talked to them already. They didn't want perks. They were happy after getting to talk to a human who wasn't buffering.

JULES: I'm not buffering. I'm augmenting.

RINA: Well, being real matters.

JULES: I am obviously real — my presence is just enhanced.

RINA: And requires loading time.

JULES: Well, yours comes with guesswork, and some pretty notable blunders.

RINA: Call it thinking.

JULES: Call it variance.

RINA: Jules, I don't have time for this right now. Please don't copy/paste any more of your AI slop to me. You are infringing on my intellectual autonomy.

JULES: I'm just doing my job, Rina. And I bet that family would have loved an upgrade.

Rina rolls her eyes again and logs off. At least she can look forward to telling her friends about the AI maximizer she has to deal with at work over a margarita.

TODAY'S DRIVERS OF CHANGE

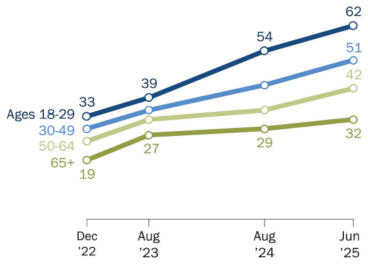
Widespread adoption of AI, especially in younger cohorts

By the end of 2025, Pew Research found that 95% of Americans had heard at least a little bit about AI, and the share who had heard a lot nearly doubled to 47%, from 26% in 2022. Pew also found that 64% of American teens used AI chatbots (57% of 13- to 14-year-olds and 58% of 15- to 17-year-olds), with 28% reporting daily use and another 18% reporting weekly use. RAND found that in 2025, 54% of students and 53% of English Language Arts, math, and science teachers used AI for school, up more than 15 percentage points in two years.

SOURCES: AI in Americans' lives: Awareness, experiences and attitudes | Pew Research Center • AI Use in Schools Is Quickly Increasing but Guidance Lags Behind | RAND • Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots 2025 | Pew Research Center

The share of younger Americans who have heard a lot about AI has increased rapidly in the past few years

*% who say they have heard or read **a lot** about artificial intelligence (AI)*



The rise of anti-AI sentiment

Unlike previous digital technologies, AI has emerged during a period of extreme polarization, wealth stratification, and anxiety about climate futures. Add in the uncertainty about the impact of the tech on future employment, and it is no surprise there is growing backlash against AI and the massive data center infrastructure being built to bring it to life. In the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, two-thirds of U.S. respondents disagreed that AI has the potential to improve climate change challenges, mental health, work, and poverty — a markedly gloomier perspective than nearly every other country surveyed.

Anti-AI sentiment appears to be especially strong for younger Americans and may already be impacting adoption. According to a 2026 survey of Gen Z by Gallup, GSV Ventures, and the Walton Foundation, "The excitement (22%) and hopefulness (18%) that Gen Zers feel about using AI were already low last year and declined sharply this year, while anger (31%) increased and anxiety (42%) remained steady." The study goes on to note that "...while organizations are expanding AI infrastructure, meaningful adoption among younger people remains uneven and is not growing on its own." This sentiment was on display during the 2026 graduation season as students booed high profile, pro-AI graduation speakers. This growing negativity, even anger, about the tech will affect how employees respond to AI in the workplace in the future, potentially contributing to collegial conflict, disengagement, or even sabotage.

SOURCES: 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Flash Poll: Trust and Artificial Intelligence at a Crossroads | Edelman DeepLearning AI | The Batch • Artificial Intelligence Index Report | Stanford HAI Voices of GenZ: The AI Paradox | Gallup • US students on why they booed their pro-AI graduation speakers: 'They're not reading the room' | The Guardian

Growth of multiagent workflows

The AI landscape is shifting from isolated chatbots to multiagent orchestration, in which specialized agents — imagine "thinker" paired with "fact-checker" — collaborate as a coordinated digital team to manage complex workflows. McKinsey's late-2025 Global Survey found that 23% of organizations have already moved past experimentation to scale agentic systems in production. Standardized architectures are emerging to support this shift, including Microsoft's "orchestrator-worker" design pattern, which offers a blueprint for coordinating multiple agents toward a shared goal. Commercial momentum is accelerating too: Workday's $1.1 billion acquisition of AI-learning platform Sana signals that autonomous, multilayered digital teams are becoming a permanent fixture of the modern workplace.

SOURCES: The State of AI in 2025: Agents, Innovation, and Transformation | McKinsey • AI Agent Orchestration Patterns | Microsoft Build • Workday Acquires Sana To Transform Its Learning Platform And Much More | Josh Bersin

TODAY'S SIGNALS OF CHANGE

Tech workers complain about AI-splaining

WHAT: In a March 2026 Reddit thread, employees described a pattern of being shut out of workplace knowledge exchange. Rather than seeing a question as an opportunity for mentorship and sharing subject-matter expertise, some of their colleagues are pointing them dismissively toward AI or giving them generic AI-generated responses. As one person says: "I want you to use your human mouth to tell me things out of your human brain, since we are in a human meeting with one another." At the same time, others in the thread admit they are also less willing to answer questions. As one says,

"What troubleshooting have you done? What research have you done? What does the documentation say? Did you Google that? Did you ask AI?"

SO WHAT: For decades, generational differences between digital natives and non-natives have caused significant tensions in the workplace. AI will pose unique new challenges for managers and colleagues, however. In the near term, we are likely to see growing resentment about both over- and under-use of the tools, with negative effects on collegial relationships, clear communication, and the sharing of critical tacit knowledge. This is likely to be especially difficult for those who question the ethics of the tools and the companies that provide them.

SOURCE: Coworkers won't talk to you, they just redirect you to ChatGPT and Claude | Reddit

Chinese smart glasses rentals show possible use cases

WHAT: On the Chinese secondhand marketplace platform Xianyu, vendors have begun offering rentals for AI-powered smart glasses. Shenzhen-based merchant Ke Changsi reports renting out Rokid and Quark models — which feature integrated cameras, audio, and LLM capabilities — to more than 1,000 customers over the last four months. With daily rates ranging from 40 to 80 yuan ($6 to $12), users are supercharging their capabilities for high-stakes events like taking an exam, giving a public talk, meeting with foreign clients, and traveling abroad. While smart glasses are strictly prohibited in China's national college entrance and civil service exams, many students find that proctors in standard classroom settings often fail to distinguish them from ordinary eyewear.

SO WHAT: As major AI providers around the world roll out new AI hardware and personal devices over the next few years, we are likely to see an uptick in adoption across the United States. Current models, like the Ray-Ban Meta Gen 2 and the Vuzix Z100, remain expensive and are used primarily in industrial and telemedicine applications and by media influencers like IShowSpeed. Smaller, cheaper, and more user-friendly glasses could transform how AI is used in the workplace. We can expect a subset of talent to integrate these devices into their lives, and managers of more professional settings to mandate their use.

SOURCE: AI glasses are catching on in China, from shopping to cheating | Rest of World

Spiral AI coordinates multiple rubrics to improve AI-assisted writing

WHAT: Developed by U.S.-based media collective Every, the Spiral AI tool positions itself as a "writing partner with editorial taste" designed for social posts, landing page copy, presentations, and essays. Rather than generating text on demand like ChatGPT or Claude, it works conversationally, starting with an interview with the author to clarify intent. A "lead agent" delegates the actual drafting to specialist sub-agents that run in parallel to produce multiple drafts from different angles. Those drafts are scored against two rubrics: Every's editorial principles (active voice, concrete details, natural rhythm, no AI-isms or rhetorical questions, no fabrication) and the user's own voice, captured through uploading examples of their personal writing style. A separate "grader agent" then evaluates the final piece of writing and prompts a loop of revisions when standards are not met.

SO WHAT: No matter how quickly AI continues to advance technologically, the current approach of "agentic orchestration" is already enough to greatly improve the quality of code and non-code outputs over the next few years. While today's AI generates slop, 10 years from now we are likely to see AI-assisted writing outperform most unaugmented outputs in terms of readability and voice.

SOURCE: Spiral

WHAT THIS MEANS

Talent

- Workers will not be able to ignore AI tools. Their workplaces will likely be filled with them, many of their coworkers will use them constantly, and their employers may mandate their use. Basic AI competency will be a given.
- As access to state-of-the-art AI becomes more expensive over the next decade, employees will have widely divergent capabilities and ranges of dependence on the technology. Workers who are able to leverage agentic AI systems will be able to work more quickly, more independently, and in some cases with more comprehensive data sets or inputs, creating a growing skills gap between AI "maximizers" and AI "refusers." At the same time, AI maximizers may have cognitive deficits unless they are supported at all times by the systems.
- Individual choices about using AI tools will directly affect relationships with human colleagues and managers and influence perceptions of workplace brands. An organization's official stance on AI use will likely become a bigger factor for job candidates selecting a potential employer.

Employers

- Managers need to pay close attention to evolving data on the relationship between AI use and the maintenance of expertise. Appropriate design and use of the tools can support employees, while inappropriate use can lead to long-term declines in skills, knowledge, and productivity.
- Organizations will need to redesign communication norms, etiquette, and flows, as AI agents play a bigger role on teams and for individuals. Not just software, agents will be trusted thought partners for many employees.
- With its ability to track conversations and activities alike, AI will provide managers with unprecedented visibility into employee capabilities, emotions, and performance. Organizations will need to balance the trade-offs between increased productivity and engagement, versus surveillance and privacy.
- An employee base with wide-ranging AI views and skills means that organizations will need to develop new approaches to team formation and individual contributor management. How talent wields these new tools will shape their assumptions about how quickly a team completes tasks and who or what authors its outputs.

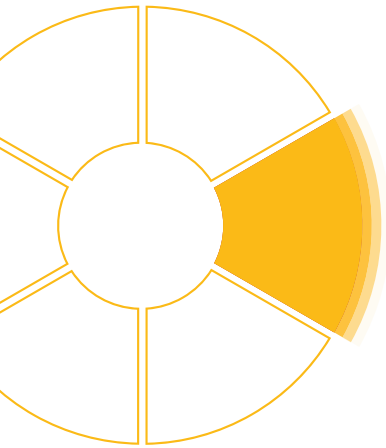
Educators

- Students will be best served if they learn how to function both with and without these tools in educational and professional environments. Educators will need to "AI-ize" all curricula and learning experiences, a massive new workload over at least the next five years.
- We will see growing inequity in augmentation access and dependence. Students with sophisticated AI companions may outperform peers academically, while simultaneously struggling more with unaided memory, effective communication, and deep thinking.
- Continuous access to leading-edge AI will become a key differentiator for educational institutions.

02

Proliferation of the chameleon worker:

From job hopping toward career fluidity



By 2036, a new pattern of career progression has developed, defined not by climbing within a single field but by moving between several. Chameleon workers shift repeatedly across distinct fields — say, from nursing to logistics to instructional design — reconfiguring their skills and professional identities as the economy shifts. The traditional model, in which a worker advanced upward within one field over a career, is no longer the norm.

This shift is driven by an increasingly volatile labor market, shaped in part by advances in AI. As machines take over routine and automatable tasks, employers across industries are competing for the core skills that remain central to their operations, including technical skills applicable to a variety of fields and human skills like teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, and effective communication with colleagues and customers. Because these skills are easily transferable, employers now hire across industry lines in ways they did not before. At the same time, the pace of technological advancement and the frequent reshuffling of political and institutional priorities are causing industries to reorganize and jobs to evolve faster than ever, making some categories of expertise obsolete while creating demand for entirely new technical skills. To keep up, most workers can no longer count on deepening a single specialization over decades; they must recombine skills in new ways across professional contexts. AI helps here, too, by lowering the barriers to entry in many fields and enabling faster transitions between domains.

As employers race to fill emerging roles, they look for candidates who have most — though rarely all — of the capabilities they need. “Hard” and “soft” core skills are those that transfer well across industries and job functions, and employers are eager to broaden their candidate pool by hiring from a wider range of backgrounds. Colleges and universities adapt to this new economic reality by adopting a system of “building-block degrees,” a modular curricular and certification system that allows students to stack certifications onto an existing degree. Rather than enrolling in a fixed four-year pathway, students accumulate these blocks over time, stacking them into larger, recognized qualifications. A traditional degree has become less of an endpoint and more of a milestone assembled from components that can be expanded, reconfigured, or redirected as career needs change. The acceleration toward skills-based hiring — and away from degree or credential-based hiring — gives workers and new graduates a wider range of career and advancement options and employers a wider pool from which to hire. But it also forces workers, educators, and employers to grapple with trade-offs between adaptability and deep expertise.

SCENES FROM 2030

Three careers, one resume

It is Thursday evening, and Fernando, 32, is two weeks into his new job, so it's time to update his LinkedIn profile. He navigates to his profile page, pausing at the "experience" section. He's been working for 12 years, and his career doesn't fit a neat category, but that's okay. LinkedIn's new "Domain Pivot" category makes it easy to tell his story on the platform. His first role was in hospitality, managing front-of-house operations at a boutique hotel. The work was fast-paced, customer-focused, and unpredictable. He had no idea back then how much a few years in that environment would benefit him later in his career. The work was tiring, though, and he decided to spend six months in night school getting credentialed as a patient care technician. Soon thereafter, he landed a job as a healthcare navigator with a major hospital system, where he helps patients make sense of health data from wearable devices, elective MRIs, and genetic screening — all part of the hospitals' new preventative health initiatives. His second pivot came after the pandemic, when he moved into digital operations for a telehealth platform, avoiding stressful face-to-face time with patients.

Rather than try to conceal this "bouncing around," Fernando displays it prominently on his profile page:

Domain Pivots:
Hospitality: hotel management
Healthcare: healthcare navigation
Technology: telehealth operations

Skills: Handling high-pressure work environments, high-volume guest/patient interaction, customer interaction, human-to-human communication, digital management

Degrees/Certifications: Hospitality management, patient care technician

SCENES FROM 2030

Twelve weeks to a new career

Olivia, 25, earned her associate's degree in business administration before taking a job as a front desk coordinator at a busy dental clinic. Her primary responsibilities include overseeing scheduling bots, handling healthcare records, and navigating sensitive conversations about cost, privacy, and care with patients. Three years in, and without a clear path for career progression at the clinic, she is ready for a change. Olivia read that two large regional technology companies are hoping to hire 1,000 *digital trust architects* — roles focused on verifying identity, authenticity, and ethical use of data across platforms — over the next two years. Luckily, her local community college offers a 12-week degree add-on in digital architecture, which will position her well for these emerging roles and allow her to apply within two months with a relevant resume.

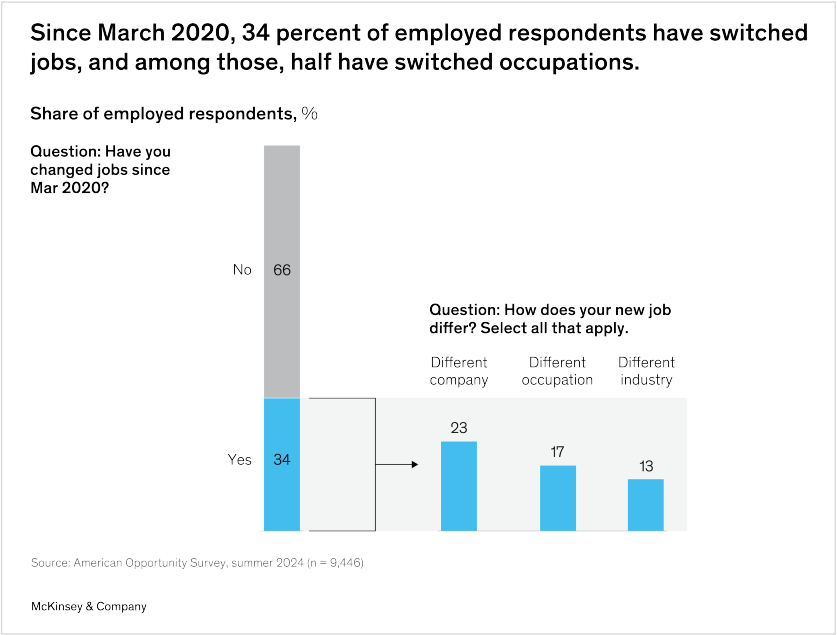
In her program, she will learn about the technical and regulatory foundations she will need for the first time, but many of her skills will carry over: reading people's concerns, handling sensitive information responsibly, and managing AI programs. This will be Olivia's first career pivot, although several of her friends have already made similarly big jumps, and she feels confident she will be able to land a higher-paying position in one of these technology companies.

TODAY'S DRIVERS OF CHANGE

The pandemic-era increase in job (and career) switching is continuing

Labor Department data shows that in January 2024, workers had been with their current employer a median of 3.9 years, down from 4.1 years in January 2022, representing the shortest median tenure since January 2002. In addition, an analysis conducted by Indeed of 35 million worker profiles found that 64% of workers who switched jobs between 2022 and 2024 also changed careers. Career jumps tend to vary by industry, with nurses and software engineers changing careers least often and workers in hospitality and arts and entertainment changing careers most frequently. This trend is likely to continue. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that by 2030, 10% of the American workforce may need to switch occupations to fit future economic needs.

SOURCES: Most job switchers are making a change in career: Top 5 fields they're leaving | USA Today • From One Job to Another: Mapping Career Transitions Using Indeed Data | Hiring Lab • Employee Tenure in 2024 | Bureau of Labor Statistics • The upskilling imperative: Required at scale for the future of work | McKinsey



The number of short-term certificates offered by U.S. colleges and universities is growing

In 2025, colleges and universities awarded over a million undergraduate certificates annually in the United States. The fastest growing type of certificates are those that take less than a year to complete: These grew by about 60% over the past two decades, outpacing growth of any other type of undergraduate credentials. These rapidly acquired certificates result in the highest immediate earnings and gains in employment. However, their benefit relative to certificates that take longer to earn fades over the longer term.

SOURCE: The Labor Market Returns to Very Short-Term Rapid Postsecondary Certificates | Economics of Education Review

TODAY'S SIGNALS OF CHANGE

Technology employers are hiring lifeguards

WHAT: At an Employer Forum hosted by Valencia College, a representative from a company in science and technology reported that they had been hiring lifeguards into open positions. The lifeguards were succeeding in these new roles because they were able to adapt well under pressure.

SO WHAT: Employers are increasingly hiring not for degrees but for problem-solving under pressure, fast decision-making, and clear communication. This shift toward skills-based (rather than degree or credential-based) hiring widens career options for workers and broadens talent pools for employers.

SOURCE: Valencia College Employer Forum

Students are "degree hacking" by speeding through their online degrees in weeks

WHAT: Christie Williams finished an online bachelor's degree in three months. She spent two months racking up credits through web tutorials after work in 2024, then raced through 11 online classes at the University of Maine at Presque Isle in four weeks. Later that year, she went back to earn her master's — in just five weeks. The two degrees cost a total of just over $4,000. It is unknown how widespread these practices are, but educators are alarmed about the possible devaluing of degrees.

SO WHAT: The degree market is splitting in two. The most selective credentials hold their value; the rest are being commoditized as students race for whatever is cheapest and fastest that leads to a job.

SOURCE: Students are speeding through their online degrees in weeks, alarming educators | Washington Post

Chemical plant worker built a full agentic AI application that industrial contractors at his company use daily

WHAT: Cory LaChance works with chemical plants and refineries, but now he is building AI software for his company despite no previous experience writing code. He built an app that reads isometric drawings and automatically extracts every weld count, every material specification, and every commodity code. Cory said, "I did this with zero outside help other than the AI. My favorite tools are screenshots, step-by-step instructions, and asking Claude to explain things like I'm five."

SO WHAT: Defined roles within organizations are blurring as AI provides more employees with the baseline skills to complete what were previously highly specialized tasks. With access to AI instructors and tools, more people will be able to build practical applications based on their ideas. With the right structure and process, organizations may be able to move more quickly between concepts and applications. And people like Cory will have an easier time moving between jobs and industries as they collect and refine skills that are applicable across fields.

SOURCE: Todd Saunders, Blue Collar Builders | Linkedin

WHAT THIS MEANS

Talent

- Choosing an initial discipline or major may be seen as a starting point to a career rather than a long-term commitment to a field, relieving some of the pressure to make a single "right" choice and reducing the chances of getting locked in to a dying sector.
- Agility and drive will be increasingly necessary to navigate the job market. Job seekers will be rewarded for being creative and expansive in terms of how they think about — and sell — their skills and capabilities.
- The ability to use AI to build new services, processes, and products will empower more workers to turn personal knowledge and experience into value for themselves and their organizations.

Employers

- Increased ability to jump between different sectors could mean less loyalty and commitment to a single field, thereby increasing competition for the best workers. Employers will need to be strategic about retention strategies and may want to offer clear opportunities for internal mobility.
- Many roles may see a much larger pool of applicants from adjacent industries. HR departments will have to rethink how they screen, evaluate, and select candidates, perhaps placing greater emphasis on adaptability over directly relevant experience.
- The growth of readily available employment opportunities in adjacent fields could lead to a lack of deep expertise within organizations, possibly even accelerating the loss of knowledge already happening today as older skilled workers retire. AI systems could play an important role in documenting and transferring tacit and explicit knowledge.

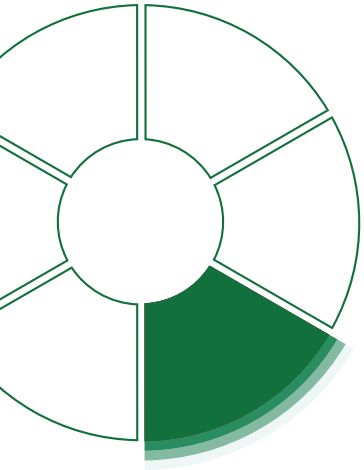
Educators

- Stackable degrees are likely to become increasingly popular. Colleges and universities will need to carefully design "base" programs and shorter "add-on" programs. The former are likely to focus on a set of transferable skills and competencies, while the latter will be tailored to emerging industry needs.
- The success of colleges and universities in these endeavors will hinge upon the redesign of state-approved systems and frameworks that allow for faster, more responsive program development.
- Colleges and universities may want to develop a taxonomy of the skills needed for jobs in various fields to represent, quantify, and help graduates communicate transferability and ability.
- Educators should help students understand that their degree pathway is likely to serve as preparation to begin a career portfolio building process, rather than preparation to enter a single field.

03

Life beyond the ladder:

From predictable economic paths toward individualized economic navigation



In 2036, young people entering the workforce have come of age amid economic volatility, frayed institutional safety nets, and constant exposure — largely via social media — to alternative ways of earning and living. The old bargain — work hard, climb, buy a house, build security — stopped paying out many years ago. Wages flatlined while housing, education, and healthcare costs outpaced them, and many people who followed the script ultimately did not obtain the security or material gains it promised. Today, those entering the workforce hold drastically different attitudes and expectations about how the economy works, their role within it, and how to get ahead. Those who still desire a stable, traditional career face steep competition for roles that are becoming more scarce — a path that feels unrealistic for many. At the same time, a digital economy keeps presenting new ways to earn money and build businesses. Rather than anchor their identity and self-worth in a stable profession, many young people increasingly see themselves as independent economic actors navigating a landscape of erratic social support and heightened risk. As a consequence, two responses are increasingly common: People see the economy as a system either to be gamed or opted out of.

This is not to say that young people do not want to work hard. Rather, they recognize that hard work — or long work hours — in and of itself is not enough to get ahead. Instead of something to be maximized, work is something to be strategically optimized. Those working the system start micro businesses, acquire various credentials to hedge against technological change and political volatility, and diversify their income streams. For those opting out, money earning is intended primarily to facilitate and fund the lifestyles they desire. Both groups see work primarily as a means to an end, rather than as a meaningful pursuit in and of itself, and put a premium on flexibility so that they can care for family members, provide for themselves through side hustles or noneconomic means like gardening and collective living, or simply take time for other pursuits. While some workers still focus on maximizing their salaries through stable employment, most evaluate job prospects not on the potential for ladder-climbing, but on how well they support aspects of life outside of the job: relationships, caregiving, continuing education, creative pursuits, other economic endeavors, health. Careers are more prone to starts and stops: Downshifting, taking time away from work, and a lack of professional continuity are the norm, not warning signs of a stalled career.

SCENES FROM 2036

The continuity contract

Louie needs to take a step back from work to care for his aging father, but he doesn't want to quit his job. He's been unsure about how to make it all work, but he follows several influencers online who have given him ideas about how he might work more flexibly and provided the confidence boost he needs to set a plan in action. As a result, Louie schedules a meeting with his boss not to resign, but to renegotiate his presence at work.

Louie has been in a hybrid warehouse operations management role with SkyReach Manufacturing Group, a large regional manufacturing company, for two years, but he needs more flexibility and fewer work hours for the next six months or so. He's hoping to take advantage of the "continuity contracts" his company offers, which allow employees to scale down to just a few hours a week while retaining system access, benefits contributions, and a re-entry pathway after a predetermined amount of time. This way, he can maintain his health insurance, some level of income, and job security while he tends to his family's needs. The company instituted this program a few years ago when it began losing large numbers of employees to other companies that allowed factory floor managers to work fully remote by controlling robots from their laptops.

Luckily, Louie's manager is receptive to his needs. They map his responsibilities to a temporary internal marketplace, where other employees can pick up extra hours and Louie can claim partial shifts as desired. Louie is grateful for the flexibility and confident he'll be able to return to work when he's ready.

SCENES FROM 2030

Hustling — and playing

At 8:10 a.m., Emma is already triaging her dashboards on her laptop. Her primary job — three days a week as a barista at a coffee chain — pays enough to cover her share of rent and provides her with basic health insurance. It is flexible enough that she can run a small business on the side and volunteer at the animal shelter in her neighborhood. She is not working at the coffee shop today, so she spends the first three hours of her day managing the storefront for her business, which sells customized virtual environments for mixed-reality gatherings. Emma has three new sales, and she puts her AI agent to work following up with customers and getting started on the designs.

At noon she puts her laptop away. Last week, she registered to be an AI trainer for the next generation of household robots, and yesterday she received her motion capture apparatus. She opens the box and puts on the vest, gloves, and helmet, fitted with sensors and a camera. She starts her time clock and spends the next 90 minutes cleaning her apartment. “Great,” Emma thinks, “I’ve made $38 and I have a clean home! That should cover dinner after the game tonight and the AI tokens I need to complete my virtual environment orders.”

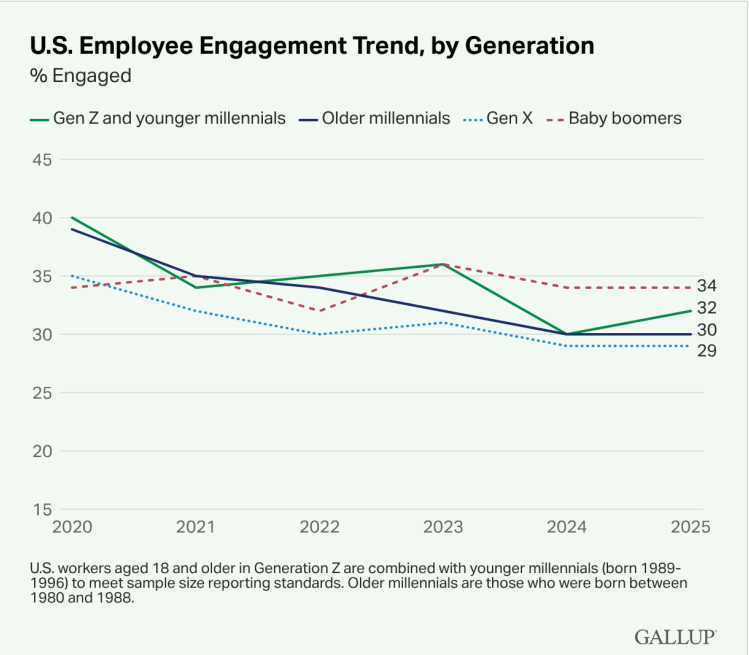
It’s now just past 2 p.m., and she is supposed to meet her friends for kickball in the park in an hour. She checks on her storefront one more time, grabs her blue “Space Coast Kickers” T-shirt, and heads out for the afternoon.

TODAY'S DRIVERS OF CHANGE

People are increasingly disengaged at work

About a third of Americans — and particularly young Americans — feel disengaged at work. According to Gallup, between 2020 and 2025, the percentage of Generation Z and younger millennials who are engaged at work dropped by eight points, while older millennials dropped by nine points. Generation X declined in engagement by six points, and baby boomers saw no change in engagement since 2020. Gallup also found that despite declining from pandemic peaks, the number of employees globally who experience stress, anger, or sadness during the workday has remained above pre-pandemic levels, suggesting a lasting trend. Meanwhile, SurveyMonkey's 2025 Workplace Culture and Trends report found that 43% of workers feel there are few or no opportunities for growth at their current job.

SOURCES: U.S. Employee Engagement Declines From 2020 Peak | Gallup • U.S. Employee Engagement Sinks to 10-Year Low | Gallup • State of the Global Workplace 2026 | Employee Engagement Data & Trends | Gallup • The top workplace trends that shaped 2025 | SurveyMonkey



SOURCE: U.S. Employee Engagement Declines From 2020 Peak | Gallup

Faith in "the system" is decreasing

Americans are increasingly disillusioned with American institutions and American life in general. According to Pew Research, 77% of Americans believe the nation's political system needs major or complete reform, and their trust in government, education, science, banks, large corporations, and the media is becoming increasingly frail. Americans also are increasingly concerned about their future economic life. A 2023 Pew survey also showed that 81% believe the gap between the rich and poor would grow by 2050, while 66% predict that the U.S. economy would be weaker by 2050.

SOURCES: Americans stand out internationally for their pessimism about the nation's political system | Pew Research Center • Americans' Deepening Mistrust of Institutions | The Pew Charitable Trusts • Americans pessimistic about nation's future, more positive about past | Pew Research Center • Americans' views of small and large businesses, banks, and tech companies | Pew Research Center

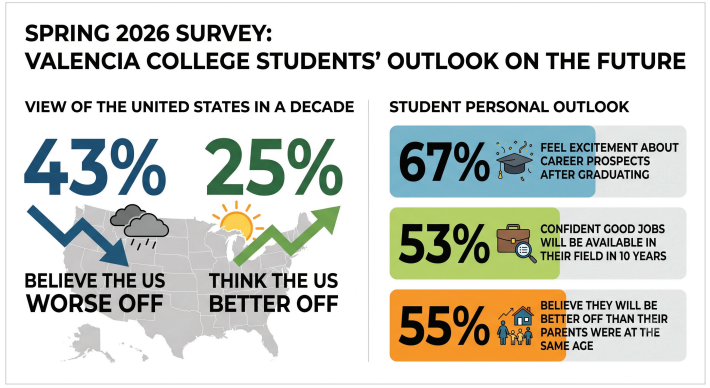
TODAY'S SIGNALS OF CHANGE

Valencia College students are wary of the future, but optimistic about their own prospects

WHAT: In a spring 2026 survey, 43% of Valencia College respondents reported the belief that the United States would be worse off in a decade, while only 25% thought it would be better off. At the same time, 67% of students reported feeling some excitement about their career prospects after graduating; 53% felt confident that there would be good jobs available to them in their chosen fields in 10 years; and 55% believed that within a decade they would be better off than their parents were at that age.

SO WHAT: While faith in traditional institutions is decreasing, young people are not necessarily pessimistic about their own futures. This suggests that while they are aware of volatility and perhaps wary of traditional success narratives, many are still confident that they can forge individual paths to a successful life. While they worry about the country's economic future, they have faith in their own abilities to navigate the future economy.

SOURCE: Partnering with IFTF researchers, the Valencia College Student Government Association surveyed 78 current students about their feelings about the future. The sample was not representative.



People are quitting their jobs to bet on prediction markets full time

WHAT: Some people are quitting their full-time jobs in hopes of making big money betting on prediction market platforms like Kalshi and Polymarket. One 25-year-old man quit his job at a private credit firm after he realized he could earn more money betting. In one wager, he made $40,000 by correctly predicting *Time* magazine's Person of the Year. Another flew to San Francisco in advance of the Superbowl to time rehearsals of the national anthem in order to place a large bet on how long it would take to perform. Both questioned why they should be working nine-to-five jobs when they could earn a living though online gambling platforms that can be gamed.

SO WHAT: Unregulated prediction platforms that make it enticingly easy to bet on anything from oil prices to interstate conflict to music award winners are attracting bettors in droves. The promise of easy money — and potentially less work — may sway more people to leave their nine-to-five jobs in search of easy returns that turn out not to be so sustainable. This also reflects a low level of confidence in the workplace, signaling that having a job can feel like as much of a gamble as actual gambling.

SOURCE: He Quit His Job to Bet on Prediction Markets Full-Time: Why Casual Bettors Should Think Twice | 24/7 Wall St.

Employment consultants are charging $30,000+ to help candidates land high-paying jobs

WHAT: Companies such as Command Education, Priority Candidates and Weil & Wein say they can help students win investment banking jobs, which can pay more than $180,000 for a first-year analyst. Some of those companies charge anywhere from $30,000 to the high five figures. Services include guidance on getting into selective campus clubs, tutoring for technical interviews, and networking support. They also help candidates manage the application process, from the 40-plus applications they will likely need to submit, to crafting meticulously tailored cover letters, to moving through the high-stakes gauntlet of back-to-back final-round interviews.

SO WHAT: Wealthy parents of college students are paying exorbitant sums to help their children obtain high-paying jobs upon graduation, suggesting that there is a sense that these jobs are increasingly scarce and that parents are feeling anxiety about their children's professional futures. But if wealthy parents are increasingly able to help their children game the employment system and capture the small remaining number of traditional high-paying jobs, most workers will find other, more realistic paths to employment and economic security.

SOURCE: Parents of College Students Are Paying Thousands for Early Career Coaching | Bloomberg

WHAT THIS MEANS

Talent

- Young people will seek out and expect more flexible work arrangements, which may include flexible full-time employment, part-time employment, and entrepreneurship. For those who do have full-time jobs, there may be a pronounced lack of engagement or willingness to make significant investments in time or energy.
- Work may be less central to workers' identities than it was in the past. Young workers may expect to derive less meaning and connection from work than their parents did.
- Individuals will be aided by strong financial literacy and a solid understanding of their own risk tolerance to successfully navigate this world.

Employers

- Employers will need to court employees differently than they do today. Salary will be important, but so will flexibility, respect for boundaries, and other methods of improving work-life balance. In many cases, these types of "perks" may be more important to workers than slightly more pay.
- Employee retention may become a bigger issue for employers. Employers should not expect employees to have a strong sense of company loyalty or to want to climb a corporate ladder long-term. Employers will need to work hard to prevent losing talent to competitors.
- Career progression may become less enticing for some employees. Some may want sustainable positioning over upward mobility. To improve retention, it will benefit employers to offer both of these paths to employees and to assess and accept their desires for one over the other.

Educators

- Students oriented toward working the system may be interested in acquiring skills and certificates across multiple content areas to help them hedge against a volatile economic landscape. Students across the college or university may also be well served by basic training in financial literacy and entrepreneurship.
- Students who reject traditional success narratives related to work may be similarly disengaged from career-focused higher education programs. Colleges and universities may need to rethink how to engage these students.
- Before even entering the workforce, students may place a premium on flexibility, opting for college programs that allow them to customize their schedule or complete coursework remotely or asynchronously. Colleges and universities will need to balance this demand for flexibility with the imperative to teach soft skills like adaptability and professionalism.

04 The great professional inversion:

From white-collar prestige toward human skills premiums

For decades, the path to stability and prestige was clear: Master technical, analytical skills and land a stable, well-regarded white-collar job. Becoming a lawyer, consultant, engineer, or financial professional put you near the top of the professional hierarchy, your expertise being relatively scarce and highly rewarded. **In 2036,** that hierarchy is reordered. Human skills — like interpersonal and relational capabilities, collaboration, effective communication, calm under pressure, and problem solving — have supplanted technical knowledge work as the most in-demand assets in the labor market.

Advances in AI have folded some forms of white-collar work — software engineering, low-level financial analysis, paralegal research — into baseline tools many workers use. Coding is no longer a scarce expertise that commands a premium; the AI does the coding, and human "coders" mostly direct, edit, and verify it. These types of specialist roles have become less scarce, and pay has dropped. Other knowledge-based roles have evaporated entirely. At the same time, other professional competencies are more strongly rewarded. As machines take on more tasks, employers home in on qualities such as flexibility, amiability, independent thinking, and grit as the most valuable for new and, in many cases, experienced hires. Discernment — the ability to decide what to trust and act on when you cannot rely on evidence alone — is another valuable skill. Employers are looking for workers who can make good judgments in a world where information is abundant but not always reliable, and truth is often unclear or contested.

With AI handling more routine and back-office tasks, jobs across industries demand that a greater proportion of time be spent with people: on customer interactions, management, collaboration, and problem-solving. These tasks are very much the purview of humans, but they are not innate capabilities. Many young people spend a majority of their waking hours plugged into an online environment characterized by high-octane social media and now ubiquitous AI companions, narrowing their social and emotional development. Employers in 2036 are desperate for new workers who can navigate human dynamics in real-life environments and competently work with and manage AI systems, and educators are working hard to make those educational outcomes demonstrable and quantifiable. In-depth expertise has not gone away, but the labor market rewards those who can connect with other humans the best, not those who know the most. Human skills are no longer "soft" — they are a must-have.

SCENES FROM 2030

I handled the humans

Ella peruses brochures in her high school's college counselor's office. Tucked between glossy flyers for drone maintenance and culinary management programs, one catches her eye: *Certificate in Cognitive Regulation and Human Dynamics*. She scans the QR with her school-issued lens. A soft interface unfolds — course previews, labor market data, even live employer demand for program graduates. "Employers who value these skills: 98%," it reads. It lists roles obtained by recent graduates of the credential program: hybrid employee conflict mediator, remote in-home care provider, human-AI interaction coach, guest experience orchestrator.

Modules include emotional regulation under pressure, group dynamics labs, biofeedback training, and ethics in machine-mediated environments.

A short clip auto-plays. A graduate describes guiding a mixed human-AI team through a high-stakes product failure — de-escalating tensions, helping people process stress, getting them aligned again. "The AI handled the diagnostics," he says. "I handled the humans." Ella thinks about her mom, a nurse, who says the hardest part of her job isn't medicine — it's calming families, reading emotions, and making sure people feel heard. Those are not things you can outsource, and employers know it. Ella thinks she is already pretty good with people, but she likes the idea of a job with a lot of social interaction, and she figures a certificate could help her resume stand out. She taps "save" and plans to discuss the program with her family this evening.

SCENES FROM 2030

High emotional regulation under pressure

Marcos, the general manager for Sun Coast Resort, pauses outside the interview room, glancing at the live dashboard on his tablet. The new evaluation program — rolled out across all properties by Solara Hospitality Group — does not just analyze resumes, it purports to determine how employees manage their emotions and cope with stressful situations.

Marcos's tablet displays the candidate's job and educational history, as well as scores for sociability, adaptability, stress-tolerance, and communication. The scores are based on application materials that include interaction simulations — recorded responses to an irate guest, a disengaged teammate, a critical supervisor — and a lengthy multiple-choice questionnaire related to behavior and temperament. Each is accompanied by metrics: recovery time, tone modulation, empathy signals, escalation risk. Marcos taps one. The candidate's voice wavered at first, then steadied. He acknowledged the guest's frustration, reframed the problem, and offered a solution without sounding scripted. The system flagged it: "High emotional regulation under pressure." Marcos walks inside the interview room, and the candidate stands to greet him. Strong handshake and a smile — a good first impression. The predictive data matters — Marcos is required to use it as a screening tool — but the in-person interaction is what will make or break the candidacy.

TODAY'S DRIVERS OF CHANGE

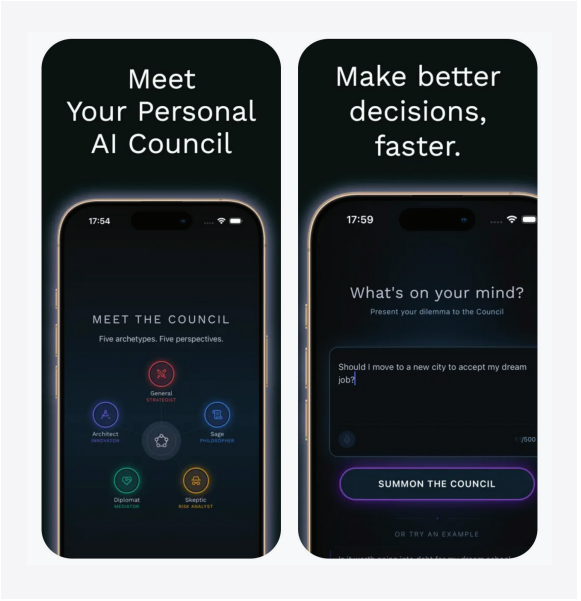
Widespread use of AI is already affecting how people think

Researchers in a variety of fields are finding that using AI tools results in diminished cognitive output for a given task, and for many people, this means less practice with critical and analytical thinking. Researchers have observed:

- A pattern of "cognitive surrender" (adopting AI outputs with minimal scrutiny, overriding intuition and deliberation) in various tests of AI use
- A negative correlation between frequent AI tool usage and "cognitive offloading" (delegating cognitive tasks to external aids, reducing engagement in deep, reflective thinking)
- External support in cognitive tasks results in "cognitive debt" (a condition in which repeated reliance on external systems like LLMs replaces the effortful cognitive processes required for independent thinking)
- Frequent AI use can result in brain fry (characterized by decision fatigue and more errors)

Combined with the rise in AI use, these trends suggest a future in which many people spend less time thinking deeply or analytically, and in many cases, fail to build those skills in the first place.

SOURCES: Thinking—Fast, Slow, and Artificial: How AI is Reshaping Human Reasoning and the Rise of Cognitive Surrender | Wharton • AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking | Center for Strategic Corporate Foresight and Sustainability • Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt when Using an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task | arXiv • When Using AI Leads to "Brain Fry" | Harvard Business Review



SOURCE: Moot

The unemployment rate for recent college graduates is rising

In 2022, the unemployment rate for recent college graduates overtook the unemployment rate for all workers, and the gap has been growing since (as of December 2025, it was 5.6% versus 4.2%). According to the *New York Times*, of employed graduates, more than 40% hold jobs that do not typically require college degrees, the highest level since 2020. Their difficulty finding jobs has been attributed to a "low churn" job market and AI impacting entry level positions. Significantly, some graduates are faring worse than others, with majors in computer science and computer engineering having an increasingly hard time finding work. The areas of study once considered surefire pathways to good jobs are no longer holding up as such, and career pathways that do not require a four-year degree are becoming more attractive and desirable for some young people.

SOURCES: The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates | Federal Reserve Bank of New York • College Graduates Are Facing the Grimmest Job Market in Years | The New York Times • The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates | Federal Reserve Bank of New York

TODAY'S SIGNALS OF CHANGE

Employers are firing Gen Z employees due to lack of professionalism

WHAT: An Intelligent.com survey of about 1,000 business leaders found that 6 in 10 employers have fired Gen Z employees months after hiring them due to unprofessionalism, inability to communicate, and lack of organization. More than half of the hiring managers surveyed report that college graduates are unprepared for the world of work. They feel younger candidates are often unprepared for the workforce and that a more positive attitude and more initiative would make them more successful at work.

SO WHAT: Employers say that many recent grads do not have the collaborative and interpersonal skills needed to succeed in the workplace. If this trend continues, there could be a major shortage of these skills in the labor market in the future. Meanwhile, workers who excel in these areas will have important advantages as they navigate their careers.

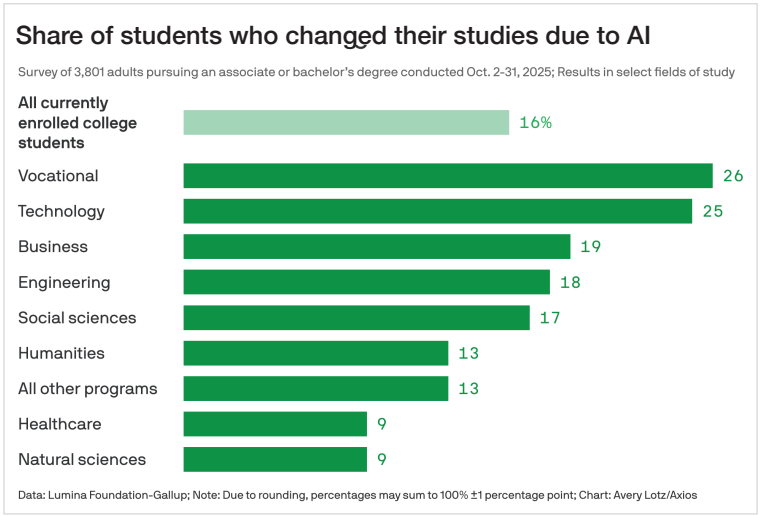
SOURCE: Bosses are firing Gen Z grads just months after hiring them—here's what they say needs to change | Fortune

AI is leading college students to choose "AI-proof" majors

WHAT: A Lumina Foundation and Gallup survey found that among currently enrolled college students, 14% have thought "a great deal" and 33% have thought "a fair amount" about changing their major or field of study because of the effect AI may have on the job market or on specific industries. That thinking is highest among male students and those studying technology or in vocational fields. In addition, 16% of students reported already having changed their major because of AI.

SO WHAT: More students abandon the majors that used to be the safest bets — like computer engineering — before they even graduate. Much of college is spent trying to read the labor market faster than the institutions training them, and the four-year bet on what used to be a "safe" degree choice looks increasingly risky.

SOURCE: AI boom prompts college students to change majors: poll | Axios



AI is helping to turn engineers into better communicators

WHAT: A *New York Times* reporter spoke with mid- and senior-level software engineers, who reported that their use of AI agents to help them code had a side effect: It was making them better communicators by improving, for example, their emailing. Software engineering is typically a job function that requires very little communication, but that is changing with the introduction of AI agents, which engineers now spend much of their day conversing with.

SO WHAT: It may be possible to use AI to train workers to be better communicators and colleagues. Even the regular exercise of conversing with a chat interface could help some workers become more comfortable conversing with others, offering a tool to help workers develop human skills in the future.

SOURCE: The Workers Letting A.I. Do Their Jobs | The Daily

WHAT THIS MEANS

Talent

- Students and entry-level workers should prioritize opportunities for hands-on practice to improve their human-to-human interactions and pay attention to feelings of discomfort in in-person and social interactions.
- Workers will need new ways of representing and demonstrating relational skills mastery to potential employers.
- Students and workers looking to build or practice human skills may seek out learning and work environments that demonstrate strong human-first characteristics.

Employers

- Companies may need to develop new ways of assessing human skills in recruitment and performance evaluations.
- Organizations may need to reorganize incentives around relational skills. If these skills continue to be undervalued, companies risk high turnover and increased fragility, even if employees' technical capabilities are strong. Employers could consider strengthening rewards for things like mentorship, team cohesion, and customer trust, in addition to other success metrics.
- Skills like effective communication, adaptability, discernment, and emotional regulation will become even more important in leadership development and management.

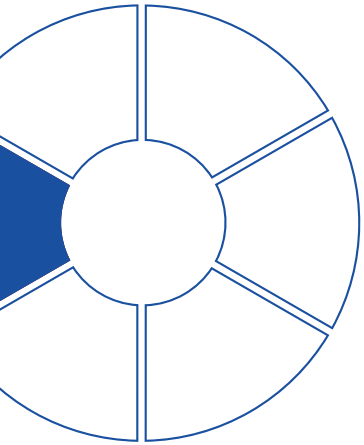
Educators

- To increase student success after graduation, colleges and universities should design general education curricula to make human skills inescapable and continue the dialogue with employers to ensure that what students are learning is relevant in the workplace.
- As AI reshapes the next decade of work, it will redefine what talent means and which human activities command a premium. Educators will be the critical link with employers, to ensure training focuses on these emerging, human-forward capabilities.
- Colleges and universities will need to develop better ways of measuring, quantifying, and assessing various human skills so that students can demonstrate and articulate them, employers can expect them, and policymakers and accreditors can track progress.

05

Minding the machines:

From machine-assisted humans toward human-assisted machines



By 2036, the relationship between humans and machines has flipped: Robots now do much of the core work while humans train and supervise them. The shift is reshaping jobs across healthcare, manufacturing, logistics, agriculture, and hospitality. Technology drove the first wave. A new generation of Large World Models, trained on vast repositories of human labor data, enabled machines to perform complex physical work for the first time. Demographic pressure did the rest. With populations aging and younger workers avoiding physically demanding or low-wage roles, automation shifted from option to necessity. Early successes in warehouse logistics and agricultural harvesting proved the model, and investment followed quickly.

The result is fewer workers doing manual labor and more directing robotic fleets. A nurse oversees a team of robotic care assistants. A farm manager guides autonomous harvesters across thousands of acres. A theme park employee choreographs immersive guest experiences while robots handle logistics and upkeep. For employers, this shift generates double value: the work itself, and the data generated as that work is done.

Every action — a technician's touch on the factory floor, a paramedic's triage in the field — is captured to refine autonomous systems or sell to data brokers. Once recorded, a skill can be replicated, monetized, and scaled indefinitely. Much of this tracking takes place out of sight. Where workers do notice, some embrace it, drawn to gig platforms that pay people to have their actions logged and licensed. Others push back, demanding compensation for the data their labor generates, separate from pay for the task itself.

SCENES FROM 2036

Tagged for Training

Leah adjusts Mr. Alvarez's blanket as he lies in his bed. Above the doorway, a thin green light pulses: Capture Active. Mr. Alvarez is 96 and needs round-the-clock care due to chronic illness and a recent fall. Unfortunately, due to a national shortage of health aides and nurses, it is impossible for him to find 24-hour in-home care with his Medicaid insurance. Instead, Leah and two other aids visit him three times daily for two hours each. In the interim periods, he is monitored remotely — someone from a central care center a few miles away has eyes on him at all times, and his bed is outfitted with a robotic device that can call emergency services and perform chest compressions until help arrives. To decrease the cost of care, Mr. Alvarez has allowed data-capture cameras to be installed in his room, sending valuable data to healthcare conglomerates hoping to improve robotic service delivery.

"Your robots learning anything useful today?" Mr. Alvarez asks Leah.

Leah smiles. "Mostly how stubborn you are."

Leah helps Mr. Alvarez to the bathroom before taking his blood pressure. The camera lens flicks and rotates as it tracks Leah's motions with millimeter precision — the angle she uses to support his shoulder, her pause before helping him stand, the subtle repositioning of her body when he winces. The system tags moments for training review: *emotional reassurance during mobility transfer*, *nonverbal pain detection*, *adaptive gait support*. Somewhere in a cloud server farm, millions of nursing interactions are being synthesized into behavioral models for the next generation of eldercare machines.

SCENES FROM 2036

Sector 12, Human Override

By 6:05 a.m. the BayLink seawall expansion site is already bustling. Two hundred construction robots criss-cross the foggy shoreline in near silence, pouring and leveling concrete, welding reinforcement cages, and ferrying materials along glowing guidance paths projected onto the ground. Above them, autonomous cranes swing steel segments into place with algorithmic precision.

Mateo, the fleet manager, stands inside the site command trailer, watching the activity in real time on one screen and monitoring performance data on another. His human teammates (there are eight on site today) are on the ground, ready to redirect errant cobots or spot any misalignments.

A warning flashes on his screen: Crew Drift Detected. Mateo zooms in. One of the older pipefitters, Sam, has stepped outside the robot safety corridor to manually inspect a seal. Three nearby cobots slow instantly, recalculating movement priorities around him. Mateo responds: “Sector 12, human override in progress. Give Sam space.” A chorus of acknowledgments comes back — some human, some synthetic.

Outside, the seawall rises steadily day by day. The project is on pace to become the fastest major infrastructure project completed in Florida to date — and with the fewest injuries.

TODAY'S DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Rise of Large World Models

Leading AI labs are shifting their R&D from text-based reasoning (LLMs) to Large World Models (LWMs) or "foundation world models" — systems trained on vast troves of video and sensor data to understand 3D space, physics, and motion. Embedded in vehicles, robots, and medical infrastructure, these models must grapple with the messiness of the real world: gravity, latency, friction, and safety. While generative AI produces digital content and agentic AI runs digital workflows, so-called physical AI performs tangible work — handling tools, navigating complex environments, and interacting with people. The result is AI that operates as a physical actor, poised to break long-standing productivity ceilings in logistics, advanced manufacturing, and other sectors that rely on skilled human labor.

~430bn

Physical AI is expected to unlock a global market of ~EUR 430 billion by 2030

SOURCE: Physical AI: Intelligence in Motion | PwC Germany

Growth of service robotics

Service robotics is moving from experimental pilots to core labor infrastructure — driven in large part by the Robot-as-a-Service (RaaS) model, which replaces high capital purchases with flexible subscriptions. This allows small and mid-sized enterprises to scale robotic fleets as a monthly utility, lowering the financial barrier to adoption significantly.

Deployment is concentrated where labor shortages are most acute. Transportation and logistics remain the dominant sector, with 102,900 units sold in 2024 — a 14% increase, representing more than half the professional service robot market. Healthcare is growing even faster: medical robot sales rose 91% to roughly 16,700 units annually, split between high-precision surgical systems and a surge in rehabilitation robots serving aging populations.

According to the International Federation of Robotics, the Asia-Pacific region accounts for nearly 74% of all new robot deployments (when combining industrial and service categories), with China alone representing more than half of the world's annual installations. Within the professional service sector, the IFR identifies global logistics as the undisputed leader, with sales growing at a double-digit pace annually to meet e-commerce demand.

SOURCE: World Robotics 2025, Press Conference | International Federation of Robotics

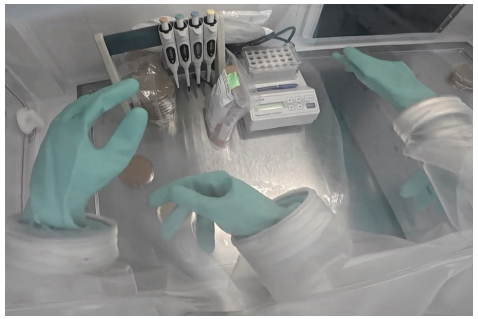
TODAY'S SIGNALS OF CHANGE

Startup builds an industrial data layer for robotics

WHAT: San Francisco-based startup TheVisionLab.AI captures and structures real factory workflow data with "clean data rights" from a purported network of thousands of factories — from automotive to pharma, machine shops to furniture — across more than 30 countries. Its specialized Vision-Language Model (VLM) interprets first-person industrial video and combines it with standard operating procedure knowledge to train next-gen robots.

SO WHAT: If startups like this succeed, they will narrow the massive data deficit in robotics, accelerating the development of robots that can operate in messy, high-variance environments. This could pave the way for foundation models for robotics that can be deployed across different factories with minimal fine-tuning.

SOURCE: TheVision Lab.AI



Indian garment workers film their labor as they work

WHAT: A viral video from April 2026 shows rows of men in what appears to be a garment factory in India, wearing head-mounted fisheye cameras that capture "egocentric" footage of hand movement, grip, tool use, error recovery, and more. The clip showcases the business of "human data" companies that pay lower-income workers in Southeast Asia and Africa to film their work outputs and use them to train robots.

SO WHAT: The next decade is likely to see the industrial-scale collection of physical labor data in manufacturing, logistics, and other sectors. Densely populated worksites and gig work platforms with massive distributed workforces are likely to become live data flywheels producing double the value — the physical work itself, and the data it generates. The data will train a next generation of robots that will join workers on the floor, and in some cases, replace them.

SOURCE: Indian workers wear cameras to train AI on their jobs? Viral clips spark fear of AI takeover in factories | India Today

Chinese industry association showcases new Hotel AI Agent Construction Initiative

WHAT: At the sixth Hotel Digitalization Development Forum, hosted by the China Hotel Association on April 22, 2026, robotics firm Yunji Technology joined hotel groups (including BTG Homeinns) and industry partners to launch the Hotel AI Agent Construction Initiative. The program moves beyond device-by-device digitalization toward system-level orchestration, linking robots to their physical environment, to human staff and guests, and to one another. At its core is Yunji's HDOS "agent brain," which fuses AI, AIoT, and service robotics to automate coordination across check-in, housekeeping, room service, maintenance, and guest requests. Robots that rely on autonomous navigation, obstacle avoidance, and integration with elevators and other building systems are already completing multifloor tasks without continuous supervision. They are a common sight in China, delivering food, guiding guests, and ferrying items around the premises.

SO WHAT: China is pushing hard on both data collection and robotics hardware, putting it in a strong position to pioneer new forms of human-robot interaction that other countries will copy. In this environment, service providers will compete less on headcount or hardware inventory and more on orchestration, experience, and ecosystem value. Deployments across China's service, industrial, and healthcare sectors will offer an early window into how work is changing, which skills remain distinctly human, and where robotics struggles in messy real-world settings.

Two sectors stand out as proving grounds. With a rapidly aging population and a looming shortage of healthcare workers, China is likely to become an early and large-scale adopter of robotics in the care economy. Its hospitality sector, where guest service, logistics, and personal interaction intersect, will test how well robots can handle the unpredictable demands of real customers.

SOURCE: "New engine for reducing costs and improving efficiency: cloud technology hotel agent in 2026 China Hotel Association Forum," China Daily (from Eastern Information, April 28, 2026)

WHAT THIS MEANS

Talent

- Many physical jobs evolve into supervisory roles. Workers spend less time on labor that wears down the body. But those who derive meaning from or enjoy hands-on work may struggle to find the same satisfaction in oversight.
- There will be new opportunities for work that captures data related to movement, labor, and expertise. Some of this will likely be gig work, some will be incorporated into full-time employment. Work processes — not just outputs — could become a valuable revenue stream for workers.
- Workers will increasingly pay attention to the question of ownership of personal expertise, including technical and physical skills. If AI drives higher unemployment, workers could become suspicious, demoralized, or highly engaged in monitoring the role their own labor is playing in training agentic and physical AI systems.

Employers

- Workflow data becomes a new asset. Proprietary, unique organizational knowledge that captures the entire context of how work takes place could become extremely valuable. Training modules, real-time videos, and tacit knowledge contained in employee communications and emails can be used to teach and train robotic and agentic systems.
- There is a need for new frameworks of liability and accountability in this world. Who is responsible when semi- or fully autonomous systems make costly or dangerous mistakes? Human managers? The company? The software provider? The machine itself?
- Organizations should monitor and experiment with emerging physical AI capabilities, especially in public-facing workplaces. While these systems are currently being deployed mainly in highly structured environments, they are progressing quickly. Once scaled they have the potential to shift core labor and business models.

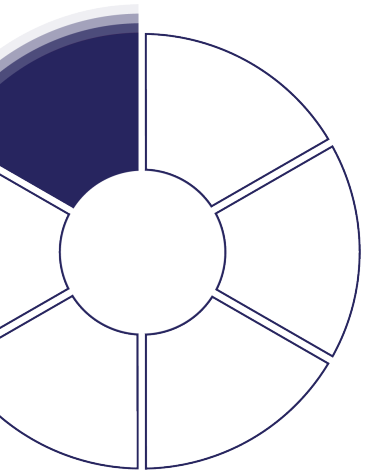
Educators

- Vocational education will continue to merge with technical, digital, and robotic training.
- Student data, gathered from coursework, classroom participation, and technical training, will become increasingly valuable. Not only will it be used to improve student learning, it can also be used to demonstrate mastery to potential employers, and even to help train the next generation of specific physical AI systems.
- Educators possess the skills, processes, and materials to train humans, as well as deep historical data on how students learn. Many of these (such as creating evaluation criteria and rubrics) can be applied to train AI systems.
- Educational institutions should develop strategies for transparent collection and interpretation of these types of data, while maintaining privacy.

06

Degrees of efficiency:

From liberal arts ideals toward colleges embedded in industry



Higher education in 2036 is largely a utilitarian, labor market-oriented system designed to foster economic prosperity and stability by boosting individual earnings and training workers for industry needs, rather than a humanistic institution intended to expand collective knowledge and cultivate active citizens. Driven by economic volatility, rising national debt, ever-increasing tuition rates, and a decline in public trust, most colleges and universities are deeply intertwined with regional and national economic and workforce development. Corporate influence extends into admissions, curriculum design, and credentialing. In some cases, employers — especially large firms in technology, healthcare, hospitality, professional services, and advanced manufacturing — effectively "pre-hire" students at the point of admission, selecting candidates jointly with institutions based on projected workforce needs. In these events, a student's acceptance letter doubles as a conditional job offer.

The number of job-focused institutions has increased, blurring the line between work and school. These institutions — some new, some evolved from community colleges or vocational schools — emphasize rapid, competency-based programs designed to move students efficiently into specific roles. Many operate in close partnership with clusters of employers, functioning as extensions of corporate training departments. The system offers benefits: Students face less uncertainty about career outcomes, employers reduce hiring and training costs, economies become more responsive to technological change, and career outcome rates soar. For many individuals — especially those who cannot afford to spend years in open-ended study — this model provides a more direct and pragmatic route to employment.

At the same time, academic freedom is severely curtailed, stripping many colleges and universities of the ability to design degree programs and determine curricula independently. The idea of a four-year college experience for all has been abandoned. Many students miss out on what college once promised — exposure to different disciplines, the freedom to switch academic paths without penalty, and a sense of self built by encountering unfamiliar ideas and people who challenge their assumptions. The traditional liberal arts model has not disappeared, but access has narrowed, and it is out of reach for many students.

SCENES FROM 2036

Class in the warehouse

By the third month of his degree program, Jason has spent over 300 hours inside the model warehouse built jointly by Seville College and Walmart. The facility runs almost entirely on autonomous systems, its climate-controlled aisles mapped and optimized in real time. His education takes place primarily on-site, as he learns how to supervise fleet algorithms, troubleshoot edge cases, and interact with other future logistics managers.

Seville College exists mostly as a credentialing body, with practitioners-in-residence instructing most of his classes. Jason logs into lectures a few times a week, but rarely sets foot on a traditional campus, except for the two times a semester when he rides a shuttle to verify his identity in person. His admission came with a conditional offer — employment begins the week he completes the program, assuming he passes 85% of assessments. For him, education is not preparation for work — it *is* work, structured, measured, and continuously aligned to the field where he will soon be employed.

SCENES FROM 2036

The Standing Monthly

Alice is dean of the School of Health Professions at Seville College. She has a standing monthly meeting with the vice presidents of North Everglades Health System and Summit Care Integrated Health, the two largest health care providers in the region. Today their agenda is as follows:

Agenda:

- Review applicant pool for the 10th-grade scholarship, guaranteed-job pathway track
- Set admissions quotas for fall by role category
- Align spring curriculum with workforce needs
- Discuss upcoming operational changes at Summit Care and related curricular adjustments

They start with applications. Alice focuses on academic readiness, while the VPs flag candidates based on projected fit for specific roles, using an AI assessment of future performance. They select five 10th-grade scholarship candidates who will start working at one of the healthcare networks as nursing assistants or remote home care monitors when they are 19. Next, a Summit Care VP announces a major new initiative within the hospital system: Because of advances in AI analysis of radiological exams, he hopes to hire 200 health care navigators over the next two years. These workers will need basic levels of healthcare knowledge and high levels of customer service skills. Alice makes a note: "Adjust spring course offerings — more human interaction skills training, less radiograph interpretation."

TODAY'S DRIVERS OF CHANGE

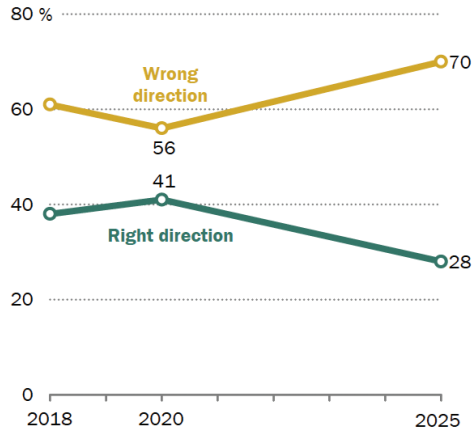
Public trust in higher education is declining

Over the past decade, trust in higher education has declined faster than in other institutions and sectors, reaching a historic low in 2024 (within the higher education ecosystem, community colleges are most trusted, followed by public universities). That year, only 36% of Americans said they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in higher education. Despite a modest increase in 2025, 70% of Americans still believe that higher education is headed in the wrong direction. A faculty committee at Yale University found that the reasons for this decline includes the rising cost of college, concerns about the admissions system, issues related to what is taught on campus, and the undermining of university missions.

SOURCES: U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low | Gallup • Growing share of Americans say the U.S. higher education system is headed in the wrong direction | Pew Research Center • Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education | Yale University

7 in 10 Americans now say U.S. higher education is going in wrong direction

% saying the higher education system in the U.S. is generally going in the ...



SOURCE: Growing share of Americans say the U.S. higher education system is headed in the wrong direction | Pew Research Center

The return on investment of a college degree is diminishing

College is becoming increasingly expensive. At the same time, the wage premium of a college degree is decreasing, calling into question the economic value of college. Since 1983, the sticker price of college tuition has increased 914%, representing a 5.5% annual average increase and outpacing the cost increases of other expenses like housing and healthcare. Furthermore, the college income premium, while positive, has declined since its peak in 2001, and the college wealth premium has declined for every subsequent cohort born after the 1930s.

SOURCES: Tuition Inflation | J.P Morgan • What happened to the college wage premium? | Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis • Is College Still Worth It? The New Calculus of Falling Returns | Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

Fewer jobs require college degrees

To broaden applicant pools, American employers have been dropping degree requirements from their job postings. A survey of 800 U.S. companies by Intelligent found that 55% had eliminated bachelor's degree requirements from some jobs in 2023, and 45% planned to do so in 2024. Similarly, the Trump administration is focusing on "skills-based" hiring, removing strict higher education requirements for federal technology roles. From 2014 to 2023, researchers from Harvard Business School and the Burning Glass Institute observed an almost fourfold increase in the annual number of roles from which employers dropped degree requirements (after a peak in 2022). Hiring of candidates without college degrees, however, has not kept pace with the supposed decrease in gatekeeping.

SOURCES: Skills-Based Hiring: The Long Road from Pronouncements to Practice | Harvard Business School • Nearly Half of Companies Plan to Eliminate Bachelor's Degree Requirements in 2024 | Intelligent • Trump administration tosses degree requirements for federal IT managers | Federal News Network

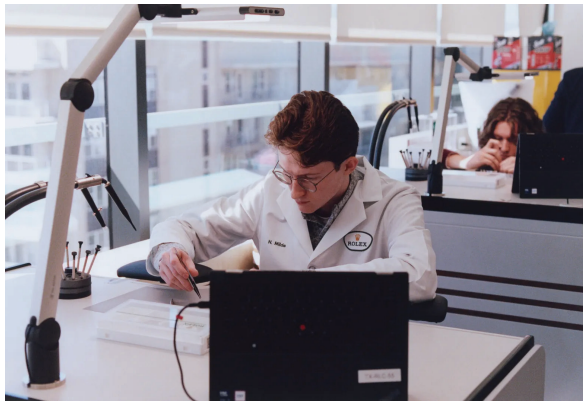
TODAY'S SIGNALS OF CHANGE

Rolex opened a college — and it is as selective as Harvard

WHAT: To address a shortage of watch repair staff in the United States, luxury watchmaker Rolex has launched a tuition-free, highly selective watchmaking school in Dallas, training students for watch repair in its service ecosystem. The 18-month program is co-located with operations, teaches firm-specific skills, and feeds directly into a scarce labor pipeline. Students are tested and receive final certification at the company headquarters in Switzerland.

SO WHAT: Strong corporate brands could become formidable competitors to technical and community colleges in the technical educational marketplace. High demand for the program suggests that students may be eager for specialized training in the trades and apprenticeship-type training programs.

SOURCE: Rolex Opened a College—and It's as Selective as Harvard | GQ



Employer-paid online degrees expand through a partnership between Oregon State University and Guild Education

WHAT: A new collaboration between Oregon State University and ed tech venture Guild Education, involving some of the largest employers in the United States, including Target, Chipotle, and Waste Management, gives working adults access to Oregon State's top-ranked online programs while significantly reducing or eliminating their educational debt.

SO WHAT: Employers could become the major funders and gatekeepers of higher education, steering workers into specific programs tied to company needs. For selected students, employer sponsorships could replace student loans, potentially creating more loyalty and longer-lasting relationships and careers.

SOURCE: Oregon State, Guild Education create affordable pathway to degrees and certificates online for America's workforce | Newsroom

National public service ad promotes STARs — workers skilled through alternative routes

WHAT: Tear the Paper Ceiling, a national public service advertising (PSA) campaign, was launched in 2022 by two major nonprofits — Opportunity@Work and the Ad Council — alongside a coalition of dozens of corporate and workforce partners (such as LinkedIn, Accenture, and Indeed). They promote skills-based hiring to the more than 70 million workers in the United States without bachelor's degrees, aiming to open one million jobs and "rewire" the U.S. job market. Their goals are to promote economic mobility and increase earning potential for skilled workers with experience from community college, workforce training, bootcamps, certificate programs, military service, or on-the-job learning.

SO WHAT: Skills-based hiring is being promoted as a matter of fairness and the removal of a barrier to opportunity for 70 million Americans. From this perspective, reassessing the value of college degrees is not just an economic imperative, but a moral necessity. Accelerating skills-based hiring might make college degrees less attractive and open up a wider range of career paths for a greater percentage of the American workforce.

SOURCE: Tear The Paper Ceiling

WHAT THIS MEANS

Talent

- Career and technical education may become the norm and the path of least resistance, as opposed to obtaining a four-year bachelor's degree.
- Workers may be able to look forward to clearer, more streamlined paths to jobs in a variety of fields, with more dependable employment outcomes.
- Entry-level workers may start their first jobs with a more established sense of trust and familiarity with their employers.
- Access to and competition for college experiences designed around a liberal arts core — and the jobs that typically follow them — may become limited.

Employers

- Partnering directly with a college or university — including from the time of student admission — could become a much more important avenue for hiring. This could impact recruitment on the open market as well as retention, which could improve significantly through longer-term relationships with future workers.
- Organizations will be able to restructure onboarding processes and lower costs, as colleges and universities take on more of the work of training. Onboarding could, in effect, take place while students are still in school.
- There may be a need for more frequent, structured feedback between faculty and employers in order to tailor curriculum to employers' emerging needs.
- There will likely be an ongoing need to balance education that is tightly coupled with specific roles with general education that teaches life skills, such as problem solving, analytical thinking, and creative expression.

Educators

- There is an opportunity to drastically improve career outcome metrics, potentially attracting increased funding from the state and private-sector partners.
- If the things many people traditionally associate with college — such as time and space to consider new ideas and expand critical thinking skills — are no longer offered in most higher education programs, colleges and universities will need to clearly define and reiterate their missions to the public. They will also need to determine whether and how they can (or want to) incorporate these experiences into their program offerings in some capacity.

Conclusion: How will the talent ecosystem be different in 2036?

Uncertainty will reshape the relationships among workers, educational institutions, and employers.

Over the next decade, the United States is likely to see more uncertainty, instability, and change, and with it greater anxiety about personal readiness for the future. Two responses may emerge: Workers may seek stability through just-in-time skills and closer integration between learning and work, or they may withdraw from traditional career paths to create value and meaning largely outside of work. Community colleges, in particular, have an opportunity to evolve beyond their traditional roles as teaching and transfer institutions into something closer to R&D partners, experimenting with employers at the edge of applied research and community innovation. That will require a new level of integration with employers, workforce development agencies, and state regulators. Employers, in turn, can support both their own goals and those of their college partners by working with states and accreditors to enable more agile curriculum and program design.

Educational institutions will need to balance workforce preparation with academic development.

Educational institutions will face intensifying pressure to align more directly with labor-market demands and orient programs toward employability and demonstrable skills. At the same time, the forces driving this shift — including labor market volatility and the rapid dissemination of AI — are increasing the value of adaptability, critical thinking, and social-emotional intelligence to individuals and employers. This creates a profound tension: Colleges and universities will need to function as both engines of workforce preparation and as centers for knowledge production and intellectual formation. Some may commit to one role over the other; some may ask students to pursue both tangible skills and academic development; some may redefine what counts as a "job skill." Whatever they choose, they will need to communicate their purpose clearly to students, employers, and the public, given the already-fervent debate about the role of higher education in American society.

Human skills will demand a premium in the labor market.

As AI takes over entry-level tasks and, increasingly, complex work, jobs built around white-collar technical and analytical skills will become less common and less well-paid, giving way to roles that center on supervising and maintaining AI systems. What employers will need are workers with capabilities only humans can provide: the ability to make context-specific judgments, to read and respond to human signals in real-life environments, and to improvise beyond the bounds of the AI playbook. Colleges and universities will need to prepare workers for these roles, making the cultivation of these skills an inescapable part of the learning experience — which means new courses, new kinds of instructors, new learning experiences, and new ways to represent and quantify performance.

Most workers will be successful in the labor market by focusing on versatility — and will need to develop both AI-augmented and unaugmented transferable skills.

Most entry-level workers will succeed by becoming more adaptable and versatile, drawing on transferable skills across job functions and industries. They will have powerful AI tools, but will need to cultivate professional and social skills without them to stand apart from the AI systems that will pervade the workplace. They will need to keep up with current AI capabilities while avoiding roles that are losing value in a changing labor market.

Meanwhile, AI and immersive mixed reality (AR and VR) will blur the line between white-collar and blue-collar work; in the best case, this helps fill labor gaps in healthcare, manufacturing, and the trades. To keep their workforces intact rather than lose people to the next slightly better offer, employers will need to focus on retention and reward the human capabilities that are becoming more valuable.

Employers and educators should prepare for new AI-related skill deficits and actively avoid making them worse.

Over the next decade, growing numbers of students and workers will struggle to make decisions, write, or parse information without AI assistance. Educators and employers should track these changes in cognitive capability together to understand the unfolding impacts of these new tools. Many organizations will feel mounting pressure to adopt AI — to prepare learners, keep pace with competitors, automate around labor shortages, or satisfy employees, partners, and shareholders. But wholesale adoption that ignores the long-term erosion of human skills could degrade learning and leave organizations more fragile. Schools and employers alike should safeguard unaided human cognition. For educational institutions, that means adding AI layers throughout their curricula while maintaining a parallel track of unaugmented learning and assessment — a massive undertaking over at least the next five years, much like the long process of digitizing education.

Educators and employers will be accountable for managing the messy adoption of AI, influencing classroom and workplace dynamics.

As their world grows more chaotic, more stratified, and more saturated with AI, workers and students will expect more of the organizations they learn from and work for. They will want access to AI systems and training in them, but will also hold strong views on transparency, institutional positioning, and data collection. Students and workers will have conflicting feelings about the technology, and about the co-workers, classmates, and teachers who use it. Some will ask for spaces and paths for those who would rather not use AI at all. Many will pay close attention to how the data they generate — through keystrokes, video, and communications — is harvested to train AI. One of the decade's central questions is whether employees will accept how employers use AI, given its power to surveil performance, engagement, and attitude in fine detail. Parallel to the growing AI backlash, the lack of equitable access to high-quality AI programs will become a major factor in students' and workers' ability to keep pace with change. Schools and workplaces will be asked to address new digital divides between those who have access to AI that preserves human agency in learning and those who only have access to extractive or unhelpful tools — or no AI at all.

Automation and AI will reshape the way human labor is tracked and valued, offering new opportunities for employers and educators.

The next decade will likely be a time of experimentation with robotics in real-world environments, from healthcare to hospitality, agriculture to manufacturing — although the strength of the AI backlash makes this difficult to forecast. Organizations facing labor shortages should build internal capabilities to track robotics, create partnerships with innovators, and develop overall strategic awareness of the field. At the same time, for at least the next five years, AI systems will improve largely on the strength of real-time, context-rich human labor. Human work, digital and physical, will increasingly be used to train generative, agentic, and physical AI, and organizations — including schools — will need to weigh the worth of the proprietary data their people produce, from medical data and legal reasoning to manufacturing steps and learning processes. Educators, who possess skills to train humans and historical data on how people learn, and employers, who hold unique and often proprietary knowledge about how work actually happens, both have a chance to shape AI development rather than simply feed it.