

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI at Work: Strategy Matters More Than Tools

By Vinciane Beauchene, Sylvain Duranton, David Martin, Vanessa Lyon, and Jeff Walters

SLIDESHOW JUNE 03, 2026 8 MIN READ



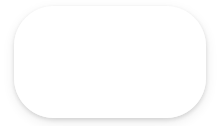
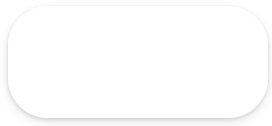
AI at Work: Strategy Matters More Than Tools

AI is reshaping jobs fast. Even faster than companies are reshaping work. A breakthrough 74% of frontline employees are now regular AI users. Of frontline workers, the 42% who are regular AI users report saving a workday each week. And more than two-thirds of all employees of all types say AI has taken over simpler tasks, leaving them with more complex work.

Despite this progress, the ways in which organizations operate haven't kept pace. The driving force for achieving long-term success with AI is strategic clarity. Having an explicit plan is so crucial that it improves AI's impact even at organizations with limited access to AI tools, according to BCG's fourth annual AI at Work survey.

These and other findings from this year's survey reinforce patterns first described in our 2025 report. The 2026 survey of close to 12,000 frontline employees, managers, and leaders in more than a dozen global markets also reveals other emerging trends. For one, using AI to create value isn't the opposite of keeping people happy—the two go hand in hand. Findings also show that AI agents are integrated into more processes than ever, leading 61% of people to believe that in the next three years the autonomous technology could do at least half of their jobs. With employees' AI adoption a given, the real work of transforming it into measurable business improvement requires redesigning how organizations and people function. The slideshow below outlines the full survey results.





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New Findings Reinforce Trends Observed in 2025

The survey confirms how far AI has come in a relatively short time. Of all frontline employees who are regular AI users, 42% save eight hours, the equivalent of a day's worth of work a week—and the time savings is even higher for functions such as marketing (60%), IT (53%), and human resources (50%).

However, 66% still receive limited or no guidance on what to do with the time they save, and more than 50% are not reinvesting time saved into more strategic work.

Compared to 2023, the number of organizations that have graduated to using AI to reshape or invent end-to-end or to invent new business models has nearly doubled—42% versus 22%. Although organizations using AI to reshape or invent remain in the minority, they continue to create more value and a better employee experience than organizations focused solely on deploying AI tools. The superior results show up across multiple indicators of success, including in time saved and value captured, and in employees' trust, confidence, and enjoyment of their work, among other measures.

While getting proper training and support from leaders is a strong driver of AI's potential, it remains one of the biggest unmet needs. Close to three-quarters (72%) of all respondents say expectations for the skills they need have shifted; however, only 36% feel that they have received adequate upskilling. Only a third of frontline employees say leadership's communications about AI are clear, and only 28% see a strong connection between what leaders say and what the organization actually does.

Transformation Is in the Works, But Obstacles Remain

As organizations gain experience and AI use becomes more sophisticated, practices that create value and engagement are solidifying.

No more “silicon ceiling”: frontline employees have integrated AI into their daily work.

Workflows depend on frontline employees, so engaging them has been central to AI transformation initiatives. For the past few years, only around 50% of frontline workers reported using AI daily or several times a week. This year marked a turning point to 74%, driven primarily by more widespread adoption among older workers, people in operational roles, and people in lagging geographic markets. India, the Middle East, and Australia lead other markets for having the most frontline employees who are regular AI users, and people in support functions are its most ardent fans.

The real challenge now is organizational and managerial.

AI has reconfigured how people spend their workday, how their performance is perceived, and the skills they need to succeed—which companies have yet to reflect in their management systems and organizational structure. Seventy-two percent of people say AI has changed expectations for the skills they should have, and 67% say it has taken over simpler tasks, leaving them with more complex work. Almost as many (60%) say the bar for work that counts as “good enough” is higher. Close to half or more report spending more time reviewing and correcting AI output or managing and directing AI. And 41% say AI has increased the time they spend making decisions.

Business value and employee joy aren't tradeoffs, they're driven by the same forces.

AI's “joy paradox” means that it makes work both better and harder. More than two-thirds of regular AI users report more job satisfaction since using the technology, particularly leaders. And 41% of all respondents—and 48% of leaders—report increased mental strain associated with using it. The same

actions that drive business impact also help employees thrive, including when a company acts in a way that communicates the value of AI, tracks AI's value, and involves people in AI ideation.

Will the AI "honeymoon" to last? Strategic clarity beats tools in driving sustained impact.

The biggest hindrance to a successful AI transformation is ambiguity. Strategic clarity means more than providing AI tools: using measurable impact as a gauge, employees who get clear directions outperform those with greater access to AI tools. Talking to employees about AI in terms they care about also helps. Early in employees' AI adoption, the novelty of using new technology and the cognitive stretch associated with it fuel the joy people get from their jobs. As time goes on, offering strategic clarity, relevant messaging, and direction on what to do with the time that AI saves sustain the workforce's AI honeymoon. The AI-related factors that drain job joy are the same regardless of people's level of experience using the technology: difficulty showing the unique value someone brings to their role and inadequate training.

AI agents have evolved from concept to reality, but operating models haven't caught up.

The vast majority of respondents (84%) have heard of AI agents, tools that act autonomously with minimal human oversight. More than twice as many respondents as last year say their organizations have integrated AI agents into workflows (30% vs. 13%). Another 50% say their workplace has run AI agent experiments or pilots. The experience is leading people at all levels to believe that agents could do at least half of their job within three years, with leaders and managers expecting the biggest shift. But awareness and integration of AI agents have outpaced the systems that companies have enacted to supervise them. Half of all respondents say their companies lack clear governance for managing teams with people and AI, and almost as many say AI-related accountability is one of their three top concerns for the future.

Five CEO Imperatives

To reinforce AI's collective benefits and promote employees' ongoing engagement and job enjoyment—especially as more autonomous agents appear in workflows—CEOs should take a holistic approach to AI transformations.

Make strategic clarity your top priority, and own it personally.

Strategic clarity is not a communications task, it's a leadership posture. Set AI as an explicit top priority. Be clear about where the company is heading and make sure everyone gets it, the frontline included. CEOs who personally own the transformation outperform on every dimension: value captured, employee joy, and trust.

Change the scoreboard: measure value, not adoption.

Adoption tells you that people use AI, not whether it pays off. The time that individuals save leaks out of the organization unless it is tracked and deliberately reinvested. So, watch business outcomes rather than usage.

Invest in redesigning work end-to-end, not in more tools.

Most companies still treat AI as a tool for individual productivity, but the more important change is a

collective one: AI is reshaping how teams work together and how tasks flow across the organization. The redesign means redesigning a few core processes from end-to-end.

Put people at the heart of that redesign.

The redesign only works if people are in it. Look ahead at how roles will shift over the next few years, train for the skills that matter most, and bring people into shaping the change rather than presenting it to them. What keeps people engaged is knowing how AI helps them grow, not how much faster they work.

Govern it as a moving target, not a one-off program.

Technology moves faster than any company can. Treat AI as something you keep steering, not a program with a finish line. Put a light, standing governance in place that rechecks what works, remeasures the value, and adjusts as the models and agents evolve.

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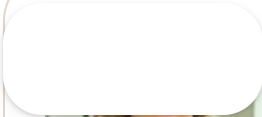
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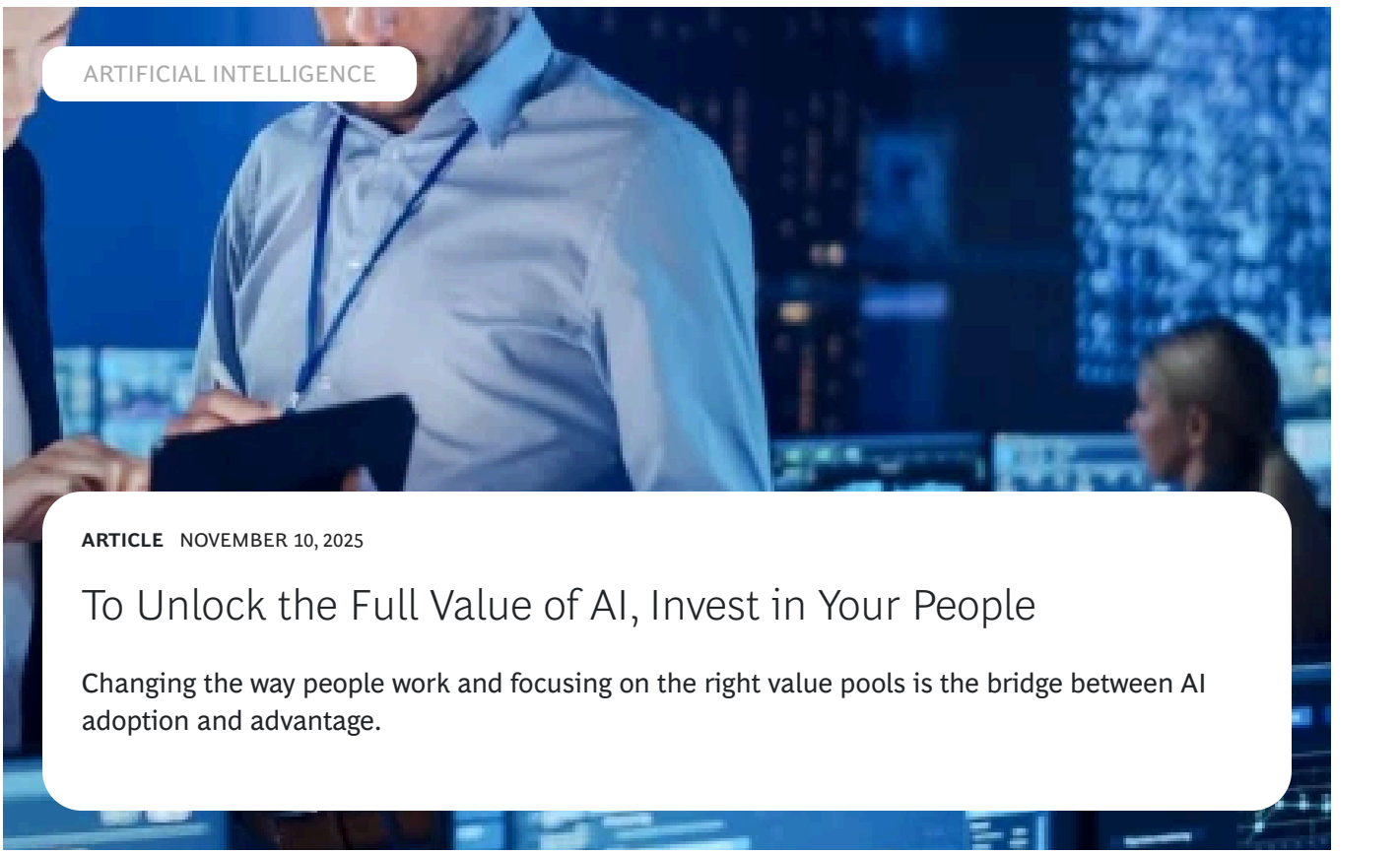


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