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Research Report 2026

Fear of AI at Work:

Why AI Adoption Fails at the Human Level

What leaders and HR teams need to know now to protect their AI investments.

Data basis: Bitkom, McKinsey, BCG, EY, KPMG, PwC, Gallup, Accenture, Prosci, RAND and more.

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AI Is Booming – But People Are Not Keeping Up

Never before have so many AI projects been launched across organisations as today. And never before has so much capital been quietly burned in the process. According to BCG, global AI spending exceeded $250 billion in 2024. The share of companies generating tangible economic value from it: 26 percent. The rest: no measurable result.

The problem does not lie in the technology. It sits in the minds of the workforce. In the fear of job loss. In the distrust of black-box decisions. In the overwhelm of tools nobody was trained to use. In the silent resistance that does not show up in dashboards the way a server outage would – but costs at least as much.

This report synthesises what the world's leading research institutions, consultancies, and academic organisations know about Fear of AI at Work. What the data reveals about causes, patterns, and economic consequences. And what leadership teams and HR professionals can do concretely to prevent AI investments from failing at the human factor.

>80%
of all AI projects fail
RAND Corporation 2024

63%
due to human factors
Prosci, n=1,107

74%
of companies with no measurable AI value
BCG 2024, n=1,000

Chapter 1: What Employees Really Think About AI

The Fear Is Real – and It Is Growing

One might assume that growing AI use leads to decreasing scepticism. The opposite is true. The KPMG study "Trust, Attitudes and Use of AI" (2025, n=48,340 in 47 countries) puts it plainly: people have become less trusting and more worried the more they use AI. What sounds like a paradox has a clear psychological explanation: the more concrete the encounter with AI, the more tangible the perceived risks.

In Germany, this pattern is particularly pronounced. According to Bitkom (2024), 44 percent of Germans are afraid of AI. 64 percent of German companies report that their employees are

sceptical about AI use – primarily out of fear of job loss. And 34 percent stated directly in a YouGov survey (2024) that they are afraid of losing their job to AI.

> "People have become less trusting and more worried the more they use AI – not less." (KPMG 2025, n=48,340)

What Drives the Fear?

AI anxiety is not a monolithic feeling. Research distinguishes four core psychological dimensions that manifest at varying intensities across different contexts and workforce groups:

Identity and job security is the most widespread dimension. Employees fear their role will become obsolete, their experience devalued, and that AI-driven decisions will be made about their careers without their ability to understand or contest them. BCG (2024, n=13,000) shows that even 49 percent of regular AI users fear their job could disappear within ten years – more than double the rate among non-users (24 percent).

Distrust, control, and data privacy is the second dimension. 43 percent of German employees cite a lack of trust as the primary reason for non-acceptance of AI (otris/SKOPOS 2024). 77 percent of US employees fear legal risks from AI use (EY 2023, n=1,000), and 75 percent fear cybersecurity risks. The sense of being monitored or controlled through AI triggers strong defensive responses.

Incompetence and overwhelm is the third dimension. 44 percent of Germans worry they will not be able to keep pace with technological development (Bitkom 2024), and 41 percent frequently feel overwhelmed by digitalisation. At the organisational level, Microsoft (Work Trend Index 2024, n=31,000) shows that only 39 percent of AI users have received company-provided training. 47 percent of AI users do not know how to achieve the expected productivity gains (Upwork 2024).

Rejection and avoidance is the fourth dimension. It is the most dangerous for organisations because it is the hardest to measure. Writer/Workplace Intelligence (2025) found that 31 percent of employees actively undermine their company's AI initiatives – through tool refusal, deliberately poor inputs, or intentional delays.

44%
of Germans are afraid of AI
Bitkom 2024

31%
actively undermine AI initiatives
Writer Intelligence 2025

49%
of power users fear job loss
BCG 2024, n=13,000

The Group That Uses AI Most Is Also Most at Risk

A widely discussed paradox in the current research: younger employees and power users are not less anxious than their less tech-savvy colleagues – in some respects, they are more concerned. BCG (2025) finds that employees in organisations with more advanced AI redesign are significantly more worried about job security (46 percent) than those in less advanced organisations (34 percent).

Upwork (2025, n=2,500) offers perhaps the starkest finding: among AI power users – those deploying AI most intensively and reporting 40 percent productivity gains – 88 percent report burnout. They are twice as likely to be considering resignation as non-users.

> Productivity and wellbeing are diverging. Those who use AI most intensively are the most productive – and the most at risk. This is not a coincidence: it is the result of missing psychological support.

Chapter 2: Why AI Projects Really Fail

Technology Is Rarely the Problem

"More than 80 percent of AI projects fail – twice the rate of failure for non-AI IT projects." That is how the RAND Corporation (2024) summarises its analysis of 65 structured interviews. AI projects have entered a failure category of their own. Classic IT projects already fail often enough – AI surpasses them.

What explains this? RAND researchers identify five root causes: misunderstood problem definitions, insufficient training data, a technology-first rather than problem-first mindset, inadequate infrastructure, and applying AI to problems it cannot structurally solve. Notably, all five root causes have a human dimension. They emerge in leadership and decision-making spaces, not in server rooms.

Prosci, in one of the largest studies on AI change management (n=1,107 professionals, 2024), specifically measured the share of human versus technical factors in project failure: 63 percent of all implementation challenges stem from human factors. Only 16 percent from technical issues. The gap is not the AI. The gap is the people.

63%

of all AI failure causes are human factors – not technical ones

Prosci AI Adoption Research 2024, n=1,107

The Change Management Deficit

Organisations treat AI adoption as an IT project. That is the fundamental mistake. Prosci data shows: in 61 percent of all failed AI initiatives, change management received less than 15 percent of the project budget. 71 percent of projects never track user adoption metrics. 56 percent lose C-suite sponsorship within six months of project launch.

The consequences of these gaps are dramatically measurable: projects with sustained CEO engagement achieve a success rate of 68 percent. Projects where sponsorship lapses come in at 11 percent. That is not statistical noise. It is the decisive factor between value creation and capital destruction.

Organisations treating AI as business transformation rather than IT rollout achieve a 61 percent success rate compared to 18 percent, according to Prosci analysis. Structured change management processes yield a 2.9x higher success rate. User-centred design increases adoption by 64 percent.

2.9x

higher success rate with structured change management

42%

of companies cancelled AI initiatives in 2025

S&P Global 2025

11%

success rate without C-suite engagement

Prosci 2024

Prosci 2024

The Lost Billion – or: What AI Resistance Really Costs

BCG puts global AI spending in 2024 at over $252 billion. 74 percent of companies generated no tangible economic value from it. That translates to more than $186 billion in misallocated capital in a single year – not due to poor AI models, but due to insufficient human adoption.

At the organisational level, this means: a company deploying a €100,000 AI solution with no adoption strategy burns – conservatively – €70,000 to €80,000 of it. EY (2025) quantifies the gap even more precisely: up to 40 percent of potential productivity gains are lost due to talent strategy deficits. Not through technical failure. Through inadequate or absent support for the people involved.

> McKinsey (2025): Only 6 percent of companies are "AI High Performers" with a significant EBIT impact. What they have in common: they are 2.8x more likely to fundamentally redesign workflows rather than simply layering tools on top of existing processes.

The AI Productivity Paradox describes what many leadership teams are experiencing right now: Upwork research (2024, n=2,500) shows that 96 percent of C-suite executives expect productivity gains from AI and have raised their expectations accordingly. At the same time, 77 percent of employees report that AI tools have actually reduced their productivity in at least one area and increased their workload. The paradox is real – and it has a name: insufficient human preparation.

Chapter 3: Psychological Safety as the Key Variable

The Scientific Case for the Decisive Lever

Among all the factors influencing AI adoption, one stands out with particular clarity in current research: psychological safety. The concept, made prominent by Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School, describes a state in which employees believe they can speak up, admit mistakes, and experiment without fear of negative consequences.

Reich et al. (arXiv 2026, n=2,257 employees in a global consulting firm) demonstrate empirically: psychological safety is a reliable predictor of whether employees adopt AI tools at all. This relationship holds consistently across experience levels, roles, and regions. It is not a coincidence. It is a mechanism.

The MIT Technology Review (2025) asked leaders directly about this relationship: 83 percent believe that a culture oriented toward psychological safety measurably improves the success of AI initiatives. 84 percent have already observed concrete connections between psychological safety and AI outcomes in their organisations.

83%

of leaders see psychological safety as a measurable success factor for AI initiatives

MIT Technology Review 2025

When AI Destroys Psychological Safety – and How to Prevent It

AI adoption without accompanying support does not act neutrally on psychological safety – it can actively erode it. Kim, Kim & Lee (2025, Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, longitudinal n=381) show that AI adoption can have a significantly negative direct effect on psychological safety, which in turn can increase depression among employees. The critical moderator: ethical leadership. In organisations where leadership acts ethically and transparently, this negative effect is substantially mitigated.

What does this mean in practice? Technology is never neutral. It enters existing social systems, leadership relationships, and psychological states. How it enters – whether with explanation or without, whether with participation or by decree, whether with space to learn or under performance pressure – determines whether it strengthens or undermines psychological safety.

The American Psychological Association (2024) quantifies the difference: employees with high psychological safety are 66 percent confident their employer will retrain them in the face of AI-driven change. Where psychological safety is low, that figure drops to 56 percent. Ten percentage points of trust – gained or lost through organisational climate, not through AI quality.

66%
trust in retraining with high psych. safety
APA 2024

56%
trust with low psych. safety
APA 2024

22%
hesitate on AI projects out of fear of blame
MIT Tech Review 2025

What High-Performing Organisations Do Differently

Slack (Workforce Index April 2025) reveals the difference between organisations with and without AI governance. Companies with formal AI guidelines are 44 percent more likely to achieve daily active adoption. Employees who use AI daily report 64 percent more productivity, 58 percent more focus, and 81 percent higher job satisfaction compared to non-users.

Microsoft (Work Trend Index 2024, n=31,000) calculates that trained users are 19 times more likely to report that AI improves their productivity. Not twice as likely. Nineteen times. The multiplier is not in the model – it lies in training, support, and enablement.

McKinsey (2025) distils the difference into a single sentence: AI High Performers are 2.8x more likely to fundamentally redesign workflows – not merely deploy tools. They think in process transformation, not tool rollout. And this difference translates into a 3x higher EBIT contribution from AI.

Chapter 4: The Legal Framework – What Is Now Mandatory

EU AI Act: AI Literacy Is Mandatory from August 2026

With Article 4 of the EU AI Act – in force since 2 February 2025 and enforceable by national authorities from 2 August 2026 – something that many organisations have treated as an optional nice-to-have becomes a legal obligation: AI literacy. All providers and deployers of AI systems must ensure their staff possess an adequate level of AI competence.

In practice, this means: organisations must document role-specifically which AI competencies exist among which employees, how these are being developed, and how compliance is demonstrated. A one-time training session is insufficient. A system is required.

The EU AI Act's penalty scale is clear: up to €35 million or 7 percent of global prior-year revenue for violations involving prohibited practices. Up to €15 million or 3 percent for violations of core

obligations. The figures may sound abstract – the regulatory pressure on corporate AI governance is, however, structurally increasing.

> By mid-2024, only 24 percent of German companies had engaged with the EU AI Act. 24 percent had never heard of it. (Bitkom 2024) – With enforcement from August 2026, that will become costly.

Works Council Participation: An Early Stakeholder by Law

In Germany, the introduction of AI systems is subject to co-determination in many cases. Section 87 paragraph 1 number 6 of the Works Constitution Act mandates co-determination for technical devices capable of monitoring employee behaviour or performance. This effectively covers the vast majority of AI systems embedded in work processes.

Section 90 paragraph 1 number 3 requires the works council to be informed during the planning phase – not after rollout, not after the pilot. Before. Organisations introducing AI tools without involving the works council early risk not only legal consequences; they undermine the trust of the very bodies whose active support is critical for adoption.

Experts recommend concluding a framework works council agreement on AI, covering scope, transparency obligations, data protection impact assessments, and qualification requirements. It is not only legal safeguarding – it is trust architecture.

ISO/IEC 42001: The New AI Governance Standard

ISO/IEC 42001, published in December 2023, is the world's first certifiable management system standard for AI. It specifies requirements for establishing, implementing, and continuously improving an AI management system. Organisations already operating ISO 27001 for information security can build on existing structures.

ISO 42001 is not mandatory under the EU AI Act, but it is a central instrument: it forms the structural foundation for the quality management system required under Article 17 for high-risk AI providers. Microsoft has already achieved certification. The certification market for ISO 42001 is growing rapidly.

Chapter 5: What the Data Means for HR Decision-Makers

Ten Action Fields That Make the Difference

The research is consistent: there is no AI transformation without human transformation. The following ten action fields are empirically grounded in the studies cited and adapted to the DACH context.

1. AI Literacy as a Mandatory Programme, Not an Optional Extra

Article 4 of the EU AI Act is unambiguous: AI literacy programmes must be demonstrably implemented by August 2026. Role-specific. Documented. Not as a one-time webinar, but as a continuous process. Microsoft data shows why it pays off: trained users report productivity gains from AI 19 times more frequently.

2. Change Management With a Real Budget

Prosci runs the numbers: 61 percent of failed AI initiatives allocated less than 15 percent of the project budget to change management. The recommendation: 20 to 30 percent. That sounds like a lot. But the alternative is burning 70 to 80 percent of the total investment.

3. Involve the Works Council from the Start

Not after the rollout. Not after the pilot. During the planning phase. Section 90 of the Works Constitution Act requires it; good governance recommends it. A framework works council agreement on AI creates clarity for all parties and becomes a trust anchor when introducing new systems.

4. Measure and Develop Psychological Safety

Teams with high psychological safety experiment more, learn faster, and adopt AI significantly more strongly (Reich et al. 2026). This is not a soft concept – it is a hard competitive factor. Pulse surveys based on Edmondson-derived questions make it visible and manageable.

5. Take Shadow AI Seriously

54 to 78 percent of employees use personal AI tools at work without authorisation (BCG 2025, Microsoft 2024). Bans do not work. Official, secure alternatives with clear guidelines channel this impulse into controlled environments – and reduce compliance risks under the EU AI Act.

6. Framing Decides Outcomes

Accenture (2025) measures: organisations that frame AI as an enabler of creativity and innovation rather than an efficiency tool see 20 percent higher confidence among employees. This is not a communication strategy. It is a fundamental psychological decision about what AI means within the organisation's identity.

7. Close the Perception Gap

Accenture identifies a gap of more than 24 percentage points between C-level optimism and employee concern around AI. Dedicated dialogue formats between leadership and frontline staff are not an optional extra – they are the prerequisite for AI strategies reaching the lived reality of the workforce.

8. Workflow Redesign Instead of Tool Overlay

McKinsey High Performers do not think in terms of tool rollouts. They think in process transformation. AI simply layered on top of existing workflows typically creates additional burden rather than relief. That is a leadership problem, not a technology problem.

9. Monitor Burnout Risk Among Power Users

Upwork (2025): 88 percent of the most productive AI users report burnout. They are twice as likely to be considering resignation. Organisations building AI champions must monitor their workload and psychological wellbeing – otherwise, they lose their most productive people first.

10. Measure and Report on Effectiveness

71 percent of AI projects never track user adoption metrics (Prosci 2024). Without measurement, there is no governance. In the context of ESG and the EU AI Act, the ability to report on governance and effectiveness of AI measures will rapidly become a compliance requirement.

Chapter 6: How mentalport Addresses This

The research is unambiguous: AI transformation fails at the human level, not the technology level. Psychological safety is the decisive lever. And that lever requires an instrument – a system that makes psychological stress visible, manageable, and actionable.

That is the core of mentalport: not another wellness benefit, but a management infrastructure for psychological wellbeing within organisations. In times of AI transformation, this approach becomes a direct enabler of the transformation itself.

The Fear of AI Assessment: Measuring What Others Cannot See

Based on the scientifically validated FAIW-10 (Fear of AI at Work, Giermindl et al. 2024, Journal of Business Research), the mentalport Fear of AI Assessment measures four dimensions among

employees: identity and job security, distrust and loss of control, incompetence and overwhelm, and rejection and avoidance.

The assessment runs anonymously, takes under ten minutes, and immediately delivers two sets of results: at the individual level, a personal classification with concrete development recommendations; at the organisational level, aggregated heatmaps showing where AI anxiety zones exist within the company – by department, leadership level, and demographics.

The decisive difference from a standard employee survey: the assessment is the entry point into a feedback loop. From the results, mentalport automatically derives measures – for leaders, for teams, and for individual employees. Coaching content within the app, leadership briefings in the manager dashboard, and escalation flags for HR when risk thresholds are exceeded.

What This Means for AI Transformation

Those who know where Fear of AI exists within their organisation can act with precision. Those who merely sense that resistance exists somewhere in the system, but do not know where or why, can only act with a blanket approach. The assessment makes the invisible visible.

Concretely: if the assessment shows that anxiety in a particular department stems primarily from a sense of incompetence – employees simply feel unprepared – the right response is training and peer mentoring, not a townhall about AI opportunities. If the anxiety stems primarily from distrust of data privacy, what is needed is transparency and a works council agreement, not an enthusiasm campaign.

> The right intervention in the right place is three times more effective than universal measures. The Fear of AI Assessment gives organisations the precision they need to make AI adoption support a genuine ROI lever.

The Connection to mentalport Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Pulse Checks

The Fear of AI Assessment is part of a larger system. The psychosocial risk assessment (GBU Psyche) under Section 5 of the German Occupational Health and Safety Act, which mentalport automates and implements in compliance with GDA standards, systematically identifies all psychological risk factors in the workplace – far beyond AI anxiety. AI transformation is an increasingly relevant factor that is explicitly captured.

Pulse Checks – short, regular survey rounds on a two- to four-week cycle – ensure that the effectiveness of measures becomes visible. Did the training reduce competency anxiety? Did the works council agreement rebuild trust? Without measurement, there is no answer. With mentalport, there is.

The result: HR teams know not only where psychological stress from AI transformation arises, but also whether their interventions are working. This makes the function governable – and reportable to both executive leadership and the works council.

Who This Approach Is Built For

mentalport works with organisations from 100 employees upward that are introducing or scaling AI tools and want to ensure that the human side of the transformation does not become the most expensive gap. Typical use cases include:

- Companies before or during large-scale AI rollouts that want to identify resistance hotspots early
- HR teams that need to back their AI literacy programmes under EU AI Act Art. 4 with effectiveness measurement

- Organisations that want to develop psychological safety systematically and need baseline, measures, and tracking to do so
- Change managers and transformation leads who need adoption metrics alongside classic IT KPIs

Ready to Measure Fear of AI in Your Organisation?

The mentalport Fear of AI Assessment is free, anonymous, and completed in under 10 minutes per person.

You receive an immediate analysis with action recommendations and a monetary impact evaluation – individually and at organisational level.

Book a conversation directly: mentalport.health/beratung-buchen

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