

The Unlock

The Great Revelation: What AI Adoption Curves Signal About Leaders and Culture

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Introduction

Generative AI has moved into the workplace faster than most organizations have been able to prepare for it. In July 2025, idealis, a human-centered research and advisory firm, began tracking how U.S. workers were experiencing GenAI adoption at work. One year later, the data tells a consistent story: adoption is rising fast, concern is also rising at a similar pace, and less than fifty percent of workers have any real guidance for how to use the technology responsibly.

The rapid adoption of AI in the U.S. workforce is revealing and amplifying what is already present within organizations, the strengths and the weaknesses. Where there is trust, AI adoption will reflect that trust, where there is a lack of clarity, it will expose that too. AI does not create gaps in a company's culture or leadership; it exposes the ones that already exist, at scale and at speed.

This brief explores that insight in three parts. First, we look at how quickly adoption is accelerating and why increased familiarity with AI has not eased workers' concern about it, especially among the leaders responsible for guiding its use. Second, we examine the guardrail gap: the widening distance between how many workers are using AI and how few have clear organizational guidance for doing so. Third, we step back to show what this gap reveals about the cultural foundations AI is now testing, and the increasing importance of effective leadership across all levels of an organization.

The Exposure Paradox: Why Adoption Does Not Relieve Concern

AI adoption at work surged this year. Sixty-two percent of workers now report using Gen AI for professional purposes, up 16pp from 46% last year, a pace of change that is reshaping how work gets done faster than most organizations can adapt.

Employees are integrating AI differently and at different speeds. Our data surfaced four notable patterns in who has adopted and who hasn't:

- The youngest workers (18-24) are 44pp more likely than the oldest workers (55+) to use AI at work.
- Hispanic/Latino, Black, and Asian workers report using AI at work at meaningfully higher rates than White workers.
- Workers without a formal college degree are more likely to use AI at work.
- Leaders are more likely to leverage AI in their work than non-leaders with 76% of leaders using AI for professional purposes compared to 61% of non-leaders.
- Industry matters too: Information-heavy industries (financial services, health, professional/business services) adopted AI first, where payoff was more immediate. Hands-on industries like construction, trade, and transportation lag behind but are now accelerating quickly.

These adoption gaps can stem from several factors including uneven access to tools, differing perceptions of guardrails, or unclear communication of expectations and strategy. The existing challenges and opportunities in an organization's culture will break through here, in the form of AI adoption or reticence, as well as openness or hidden use. Checking in with employees directly, and listening to what shapes their relationship with AI, gives leaders a clearer picture of what's driving these differences in their own workplace.

Adoption has climbed, but concern tells a different story. 78% of employees report feeling concerned about AI, a number that has held steady from 75% last year even as use has increased rapidly.

Familiarity with AI doesn't appear to ease people's concern about it, and that's part of a larger pattern: CivicScience's Emotional Well-Being index shows worry near a six-year high right alongside excitement, also at a six-year high. Many employees are feeling both excited and anxious at once, excited about the possibility of what AI can do for their work and anxious about what it means once the powerful technology is fully deployed. Leaders of AI companies are expressing similar concerns, with the CEOs of Anthropic, OpenAI and other notable figures raising flags about GenAI's incredible potential and its potential to cause harm. As organizations ramp up AI use, leaders are being asked to hold that tension without the capacity to resolve it, and are facing it with their teams head on.

The concern trickles down through companies, especially for those using AI. Similar to the AI researchers and experts who are both developing and flagging the risk, workers who use AI are expressing deep concern with 72% of AI users raising concerns about their job security compared to just 46% of non-users.

This reveals a paradox, which we've termed "The Exposure Paradox": the more people work with AI, the more clearly they see its capability and its risk. Research by Bankins and colleagues (2024) finds that perceived job insecurity tied to AI is associated with more negative attitudes toward the technology overall. As adoption continues to climb and workers gain a fuller understanding of what AI can do, including potentially replacing or reshaping their roles, concern is likely to grow for the foreseeable future. Given the complexity and the layers of emotion that AI transformation continues to evoke in workers today, leaders and organizations who are highly trusted and investing in the development of their workforce will have a distinct advantage to navigate this moment well.

The Exposure Paradox: Leading Through AI Transformation

Leaders are experiencing the paradox more acutely than non-leaders across the workforce. Leaders adopt GenAI at higher rates than non-leaders (76% vs. 61%) and report meaningfully more comfort using it. But they are also the most concerned group in the workforce: 88% of leaders report concern about the proliferation of AI tools, compared to 76% of non-leaders, a gap that has widened from just 2pp in 2025 to 12 points in 2026.

Broken out by seniority, the pattern becomes even more clear:

Measure	Team Member	Director/Manager	Senior Leader
I am concerned about the proliferation of AI tools	76%	81%	88%
AI increases my productivity at work	37%	51%	63%
AI improves my quality of work	48%	58%	61%
AI provides trustworthy information	35%	49%	63%
My company has clear AI usage guidelines	36%	44%	52%
I am comfortable using AI in daily work	35%	43%	59%

Every step up the leadership ladder brings more comfort, trust, and perceived value from AI, and at the same time, more concern about it. The leaders sitting closest to the top, the ones responsible for guiding its use, are among the most uneasy.

When discomfort around AI cannot be explained by limited exposure or lack of seniority, an underlying cause remains. A critical figure from the data highlights the issue: even among senior executives, only 52% state that their organization provides clear guidelines for AI use. Because the very leaders responsible for establishing AI initiatives lack alignment, a trickle-down absence of guidance across the broader organization becomes inevitable.

Additionally, a 16-point gap separates senior leaders (52%) and the overall workforce (36%) on whether clear AI guidelines exist, underscoring a key disconnect between executive perceptions and employee reality.

The Guardrail Gap

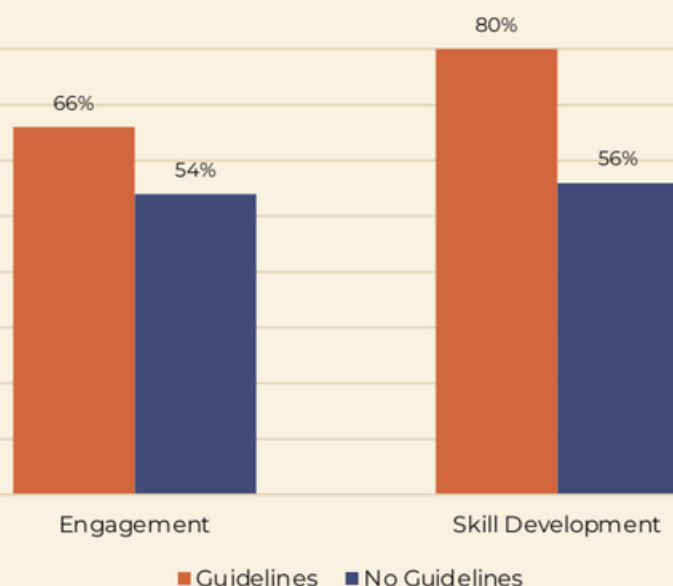
Senior leaders are missing the mark in clarifying guardrails and communicating them downwards. Only 36% of U.S. workers report that their company has clear guidelines around how to use GenAI in their roles, up just 5pp since 2025, even as adoption climbed 16pp in the same period. Guardrails, in this context, are the rules, expectations, and norms that leaders and organizations set for how employees integrate AI into their work. The gap between these two numbers indicates that adoption is outpacing guidance at a rate that leaves executives feeling quite anxious and skeptical about the GenAI transformation, and leaves employees to integrate the technology into their work without an agreed upon standard.

When employees feel pressure to use AI in their daily tasks but lack clear direction about when and how to do so in alignment with company expectations, the result is confusion. Left unaddressed, that confusion can lead to fear of the technology or AI use that drifts from company ethics, values, and objectives unintentionally. Every layer of an organization has agency, and a role to play in responsible AI adoption to mitigate this drift.

Organizations encouraging AI adoption need to first clarify their own expectations and values around responsible use before that drift takes place. At the team level, leaders can take initiative to communicate a set of agreed upon standards in alignment with the organization's expectations and values. Individuals can take ownership by asking themselves what training they can seek out to develop a deeper understanding of the technology and learn how to steward it in alignment with their company and team's guidelines.

The data offers a reason for optimism here: Guardrails do make a sizable difference. Employees at organizations with clear AI usage guidelines report a meaningfully different experience at work: 12 points higher engagement (66% vs. 54%) and far greater access to skill development (80% vs. 56%). Clear guardrails do not just reduce risk, they enable employees to grow and perform.

Clear AI Usage Guidelines x Work Attitudes



Why Guardrails Are Hard to Establish

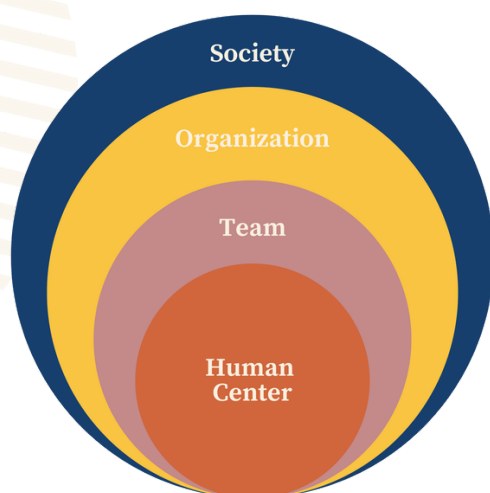
AI regulation is dominating the current news cycle as governments and organizations, including AI companies themselves, are struggling to create aligned policy in pace with the rapidly evolving technology. AI is a fast moving target: by the time a team learns a new model or tool, another one comes along to replace it. Mastery can feel impossible because in a meaningful sense, it is.

As Dr. Sumona De Graaf, CEO of idealis, said in a recent webinar about our findings:

“The thing about AI is that it’s a great equalizer. Nobody knows how to do it, right? It came into the world and it’s not like a leader has spent 20 years developing this skill. That may be true in the future, but it’s not today.”

We are seeing the impacts of the ‘guardrail gap’ at scale, in the macro and the micro:

- **Society:** Governments and regulators are racing to address AI’s safety risks in real time.
- **Organization:** Systems, processes, and roles are being actively reshaped to make room for the technology and rechannel human effort.
- **Team:** Leaders are managing a workforce that is increasingly adopting AI, and concerned about it, while still expected to extract the productivity gains the technology promises.
- **Human Center:** People differ widely in how they respond to adoption and navigate the change and uncertainty that comes with it.



In recent weeks, there has been a collective call to “pump the brakes,” as leaders, organizations, and society recognize the risk of letting the technological advancements compound faster than safety measures can catch up. Something we are observing in our firm, in the leaders and companies we work with, and in the world:

there is no shared ethical standard for how to regulate AI, because AI has not been around long enough for one to form.

As De Graaf explains, “There isn’t a common moral ground that people can stand on naturally where AI can rest. If that existed, it might make the concern a little bit lighter.”

Perhaps the guardrail gap is a symptom, signaling a deeper need for moral, ethical, and values alignment at scale. Consider a chemistry lab: nowhere in the world will you find one that doesn’t require its scientists to wear safety goggles. Every leader and company we work with is searching for the AI equivalent of those safety goggles right now, and each of them is starting from a different set of values, which means each is arriving at a different answer.

The hard question leaders across the board are facing right now is how to build guardrails without years of experience to lean on. The best starting point may be something leaders already have: their organization’s culture and values. Guardrails built on values that pre-date AI don’t need to be rewritten every time the technology changes because they aren’t dependent on the tool. They are about who an organization has already decided to be, and asking AI to fit inside that, rather than the other way around.

What AI Reveals About an Organization

We have found that AI adoption amplifies whatever is present in an organization's culture and leadership. It isn't likely to invent a company's problems, and isn't likely to solve them on its own. Where trust is thin, where expectations are unclear, where inclusion or transparency is already strained, AI tends to surface those fault lines first and fastest. Where the foundation is strong, the values are lived, and accountability is as self-imposed as it is top-down, it reveals that too.

"The greatest fallacy we see leaders fall into is thinking technology will solve their problems, it never has. New technology sheds light on what is already broken so that we, the people, can address it. If a company is built on an unstable foundation, AI will expose the fault lines. If it leads with integrity and clear values, AI will reveal that too. What workers are anxious about reaches well beyond the technology itself, and understanding that is what lets organizations take full advantage of this moment without losing themselves along the way."

– Dr. Sumona De Graaf, CEO, idealis

Our October 2025 Quarterly Pulse of the Workforce Report, Everyday Leadership: The Problem and the Promise (idealis advisory, 2025), found that leadership was already falling short across the U.S. workforce well before this year's AI data was collected:

- 37% of workers in the workforce cite that their manager is not effective in their role.
- 46% of workers do not admire their leader or seek to lead as they are being led.
- 33% of workers feel that their direct manager does not care about them as a person.
- 86% of managers feel confident in their leadership while only 63% of employees say their manager is effective, a staggering 23pp gap between how leaders see themselves and how they're experienced by others.

That gap in credibility and trust was not created by AI. If managers can't yet see where their own leadership is falling short, introducing AI doesn't close that gap; it magnifies it: more decisions, made faster, at greater scale without a corresponding rise in leadership skill, capacity, or self-awareness.

In Dr. De Graaf's words, "AI amplifies whatever is already there... We don't need to solve for AI; we need to solve for leadership." If AI is a magnifying glass for the problems already present in an organization's leadership, culture, strategy, and systems, then an AI policy or a set of guardrails alone was never going to be the fix. The organizations that respond best will be the ones whose foundation was already strong before AI was introduced, or the ones doing the work now to build a culture that is built for this moment.

Leadership & Culture are the Unlock

Start with values, not rules

The guardrails people are asking for are rarely about AI specifically. They are about a felt sense of congruence: does what my organization say that it values match how it is actually asking me to work and integrate AI into my work? In the absence of a shared societal standard for AI use, of which none currently exist, employees look more toward their organizations for that direction. A clearly articulated set of values gives leaders something durable to build on, something that does not need to be rewritten every time a new model or tool appears. Where policy can chase the technology, values hold still.

The relevant question for leaders is not "what does our AI policy say" but "what do our values already say, and have we actually applied them here."

Acknowledge your employees have different levels of comfort around AI use.

Every employee is going to have a different reaction to AI. Some will lean more opportunistic, embracing AI with open arms; some will remain more cautious, recognizing the risks of fast-paced AI adoption. Neither group, the early adopters nor the hesitant adopters, is 'right.' In reality, both groups have an important role to play in the AI integration process, and can add valuable checks and balances to a team. An insightful question to ask: "What in your past experience shapes how you personally think about AI adoption right now?" The answer behind that question, and the pause to reflect on it meaningfully, provides leaders and teams with the language to have deeper conversations that result in a clearer application of the values and philosophy they want to communicate about AI adoption.

Clarify strategy before clarifying AI use

Employees cannot align their own AI use with company direction if the company direction itself is unclear. Guidance about how to use AI means little without a prior answer to where the organization is going and how to get there. Strategic clarity, in alignment with company values, is the north star; it is the thing that gives AI guidelines their meaning in the first place. How does AI help the organization accomplish their goals that have already been set?

Before an organization asks what role AI should play in its work, it needs to be able to answer what that work is in service of.

Invest in leadership development, deliberately

The everyday leadership data reveals a 23-point difference between how confident managers feel in their leadership and how effective their teams say they are. The proliferation of AI is requiring more of leaders; whatever gaps exist will only be made more visible, not less. Leadership development is not a separate initiative competing with AI readiness for budget and attention. It is a direct input to it.

Build trust within teams

Organizational values and strategic clarity set the conditions from a distance, but trust is built up close, on individual teams, in the everyday interactions between a manager and the people who report to them. A worker's willingness to use AI thoughtfully, disclose when they are unsure how to use it, or ask for help, depends less on a company-wide policy than on whether they trust the person they work for. To build that trust, managers need the same things they have always needed: consistency, follow-through, and a demonstrated interest in their team's growth.

Conclusion

AI amplifies what is already present in the workplace, just in a new context with an added layer of complexity. At idealis, we believe that the solution to most business inflection points starts by addressing the people, leaders, and cultures at the root. The AI transformation is no different; **the current inflection point is less about technology and more about the people using the technology.** The anxiety workers feel isn't really about the tools themselves, it's about what those tools mean for the future of how we work and how we live. The key to an effective AI strategy begins with **trust**; leaders and companies taking the time to hear and understand the individual experiences and concerns around AI.

People are holding palpable excitement about what AI could make possible alongside deep fear about what it might cost. This tension is felt at every level of an organization, but very few companies or leaders are naming it out loud or outside of executive level meetings. The first step to building trust around AI is to name what people are feeling honestly and then work collaboratively to form a plan of action.

The tension will not go away soon as AI continues to be a topic of critical importance and concern at work, in workplaces, and in the world. What companies and leaders can do is return to the fundamentals and focus on what is within their span of control: **get clear on what the organization stands for and where it's going, set guardrails that manage enterprise risk and safety, help leaders cascade the message to their own teams, and provide individuals with the room to try and support them in building literacy with AI.**

Avoiding AI was never an option, but integrating it with intention, without losing sight of the humans doing the work, still is. Despite how out of control the AI transformation may feel at times, it is important for individuals to remember that they do have agency and ownership over how they use this technology. As humans and as leaders, we have a responsibility to handle the power of this technology with care, so that the race to adopt doesn't cost us the parts of the work, and of each other, that make the work worth doing.

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About the Pulse of the Workforce

At idealis, we know that employee experience is closely tied to business outcomes. Yet, while financial metrics are often tracked rigorously, the workplace experience is rarely measured with the same precision. Our Pulse of the Workforce, in partnership with Civic Science, captures real-time insights from thousands of U.S. workers each month.

This data gives leaders a reliable and actionable view into how their employees feel, empowering them to make informed decisions that foster engagement and growth. To explore the insights and opportunities the Pulse can provide, visit our [Pulse website](#).

About the Authors

Dr. Sumona De Graaf

An organizational psychologist specializing in motivation and what drives people. She has worked with founder-led businesses, family offices, venture capital and private equity companies, and boards and management teams across the public and private sector. Her work across clients has one commonality:

Sumona is called upon by Boards and C-level executives to help them navigate their most challenging human issues. As a social scientist, she uses data to draw insights, and as a career practitioner, guides her clients to redesign habits, processes and practices to create lasting impact.

Sumona is the founder and CEO of idealis. She spends her time helping clients navigate their most pressing leadership challenges, amplifying the stories of human-centered leaders, and most importantly, creating the conditions for her team of exceptional humans to thrive.

Dr. Annie Hoover

Annie is an industrial-organizational psychologist who brings curiosity and a rigorous approach to everything she does at idealis. Her research has focused on helping all employees feel empowered and like they truly belong. Through her work at idealis, she strives to deliver high-quality research and data insights that enable organizations and their leaders to bring their full selves to work and perform at their best.

Allison Williams

A human-centered leadership and learning leader who has spent more than twenty years helping people and organizations grow in ways that are both high-performing and deeply humane. As Chief Learning Officer at idealis, Allison coaches C-suite and senior leaders, builds leadership and culture solutions that scale, and helps teams translate big priorities into real shifts in how they lead, collaborate, and perform.

Allison brings deep operator experience to this work. As an accomplished senior leader in higher education, she carried more than twenty years of strategic leadership and management responsibility, partnering with boards, executive leaders, and complex organizations to implement individual and organizational leadership development.

Kendall Gregory

With a strong commitment to collaboration and content excellence, Kendall is dedicated to helping leaders articulate their vision and values through writing and inspire others to lead with authenticity and empathy.

At idealis, Kendall plays a role in content creation, research, and strategic communication, contributing to the firm's mission of bringing more humanity to the workplace and the world.



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