Why Guild's CEO Sees AI Raising the Bar for Entry-Level Workers

by
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Guild CEO Bijal Shah

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M1 editorial partner Charter spoke with Guild CEO Bijal Shah about the impact of AI on entry-level workers—where it's not changing roles yet, and how young workers need to adapt.

Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei recently warned that we could see half of all entry-level white-collar jobs disappear because of AI within the next five years. *New York Times* columnist Kevin Roose soon after wrote that "in interview after interview, I'm hearing that firms are making rapid progress toward automating entry-level work, and that AI companies are racing to build 'virtual workers' that can replace junior employees at a fraction of the cost."

These are part of a growing chorus of voices warning about AI's implications for entry-level jobs and workers.

This is something Charter has written about before. But with the recent surge in coverage, they returned to the topic with a focus on what employers should actually be doing about it. As part of that reporting, Charter spoke with Bijal Shah, CEO of Guild, which helps companies provide education benefits to their workers, about how she sees AI changing entry-level work. Here are highlights from that conversation, edited for length and clarity:

There's a growing concern that AI led companies to pull back on hiring entry-level workers. Are you seeing signs of that at Guild?

No, we aren't seeing signs of that. We work with employers who usually have a broad spectrum of employee types. So maybe in specific functions they are slowing down, but in other functions they're hiring. I read Aneesh [Raman's] post, and I've heard anecdotally that new grads are particularly finding it hard to find jobs. There are a lot of jobs out there. I do wonder if there is an expectations-versus-reality mismatch on the types of jobs that are available and the types of jobs college graduates want.

What is that gap between expectations and reality?

I've been seeing posts everywhere about new intern classes at a bunch of the employers that we work with. One of the things that I do think is an expectation of people entering the workforce, especially in more desk-based jobs, is that people come with an AI skillset already embedded. Employers are looking for these employees to help drive the future of how work gets done inside the organization, and I believe it's something they're screening and checking for. Even in interviews I'm doing with candidates, I'm asking questions around how do you use AI in your personal life? What kinds of cool projects have you been working on to experiment with it?

Then, I think there are a lot of open non-desk and frontline jobs. There are pathways into healthcare that are still going unfilled where there's a lot of demand and roles. Manufacturing has a ton of open jobs and not the skilled talent to fill those roles. I do think part of this is you might have traditionally thought, 'I need to go to a tech company.' Instead, the jobs that are in your cities and your geographies are in that manufacturing facility, are at a retailer, are in a side of a healthcare organization. Resetting the expectation around where jobs are and where industry growth is happening is a real thing.

Business school professor Tom Davenport recently wrote about a conversation he had with someone at a financial services firm who said her company is shifting from a pyramid structure to a diamond, with fewer junior roles and more mid-level roles. When he asked how they plan to get people to the middle of the diamond if they're hiring fewer entry-level workers, she didn't have a good answer. He told me he has yet to hear a good answer to that question from executives. How should companies be thinking about this problem?

You're right that there's a diamond now because there is this job that used to exist where AI can just do it and you don't need anyone doing that job. But this is why academic institutions play such a critical role in what we're trying to do—honestly, even high schools play a critical role in this. Because you'll still have a pyramid. It's just that the place where that pyramid starts is not the place where it was or is today.

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You will still need people who can learn how to work alongside AI. I have this colleague, his name is Marty Martinez, and he said something so brilliant to me last week. We were talking about jobs and new opportunities. And he said, 'You know what's going to happen in the future? We're going to have people when they interview for a job, we're going to be not [only] evaluating them, but also the agentic capabilities that come with them.' Now instead of you, Jacob, being just like this one person, what are the three, four, or five other agentic resources you can bring to bear with you so that you are maximizing your productivity on one to five instead of one-to-one in terms of capabilities? That's what people are going to be looking for.

I thought that was so brilliant because it's true. Even for myself now, if I were to take on a new CEO role or I would take on a new opportunity—I have agents working behind the scenes on some things that I was doing pretty manually or getting help with someone else from—when I go to the next place, I'm not actually one resource anymore. I'm a resource coupled with three agents behind me that can do specific things that make it so I'm more effective at my job.

Those two things are true. This is where I think people entering into the workforce being really savvy on how to utilize AI to augment their capabilities and to raise the bar where they're entering is going to be so important and helpful. I don't think those pipelines are going away. I think the bar where the pipeline starts is actually changing.

A [recent study](#) found a significant overlap in the skills needed to lead a team of agents and a team of people. Those skills may be more developed in today's managers than in junior workers.

Yes, but no. Think about your own academic experience. Did you lead a project? Probably. Were there teams of people on the project? Did you have to influence a whole bunch of people to be okay with your solution versus their solution? Did you have to get them on board with your vision? Did you have to coach them through this process? This is why hands-on learning and cohorted learning and being able to work alongside people to problem solve is just going to increase in capability. Those are the tangible skills.

What is really cool about the work that [Harvard professor David Deming—one of the authors of the agents paper—and others are] doing is they have a bunch of tools and assessments that they're working on around—I love what he calls it—'higher-order skills.' Some people call them soft skills, some people call them durable skills, and I love their words: 'higher-order skills.' The entry-level folks who are going to get the jobs—they're coveted jobs today, it's not like there's an endless number of professional services or banking jobs. They'll continue to be highly coveted, and the skills you'll look for, the bar just has changed.

How do you think companies should redesign entry-level roles in a world with AI?

You have to get really clear on where your competitive advantage [is] and how humans can unlock that competitive advantage. Let's say you're an organization who views yourself as being super customer centric. Those are your values, that's how you operate. I would think about making more entry-level jobs available in places where your employees have access to your customers.

That builds their ability to better understand the customer, to understand what the customer's problems are. I don't know any company out there who [is] saying, 'I have 99 customer problems and I have all the resources I need to solve them.' This is why I think there is power in what is happening. Now you have someone who's out in the field, who hears a customer problem and they have the tools sitting behind them to fix that problem faster than they probably could have ever done before because of these technologies.

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