Fewer Rungs, New Bridges

The first rung is getting harder to reach. Can AI help workers find another way up?

Harry Carr, Erik Leiden, Dan Restuccia, Mariano Mamertino, Gaius Ahamide

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Foreword

Foreword from RAISE US to come.

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Executive Summary

In the space of a few years, AI has become a routine fixture of office work. It drafts letters, reconciles accounts, answers customers' questions, and writes code. Its spread has not yet brought the mass layoffs some predicted, but it has coincided with a quieter reshuffling of where the jobs are: employment is rising in jobs where AI could make workers more productive and falling in jobs where AI could do much of the work. The effects are felt most at two moments that shape a working life: getting a first job, and moving from one job to a better one. On the first, the news is not good. On the second, there is real promise.

A career used to start at the bottom of a ladder. A new hire did an occupation's routine work – the filing, the data entry, the first drafts – and learned the rest from the people a rung above. Routine work is the work AI does best. Across all occupations, the share of job postings open to beginners has barely moved, and the 50 employers posting the most jobs have raised it. But in industries where AI use is most widespread, entry-level openings now make up a smaller share of postings. That makes it harder for young workers to break into these industries, and stores up a shortage of experienced staff that the same employers will feel in the years ahead.

AI may also provide part of the solution, by making it easier to move into some better-paid occupations. A statistical assistant who becomes a data scientist, for example, gets an estimated pay rise of about 80%, and AI could help a newcomer close about three-quarters of the skills gap between the two jobs. We studied 2,741 established step-up moves like this, all into occupations facing or starting to face a shortage of workers. Across them, though, more of the gap is in skills where AI mainly helps people who already have them.

In industries with the highest rates of AI use, the usual way into office careers is narrowing, while some established routes between jobs are becoming more common – routes that, for now, mostly favor workers who already hold a degree.

KEY FINDINGS

1. **Among the third of occupations most exposed to AI, jobs where AI could help workers grew by 1.4 million between 2023 and 2025, while jobs where AI could do much of the work lost 820,000.** Most of the losses are in middle-skill clerical and customer service jobs that have long been a way into the middle class, especially for people without a college degree.

2. **White-collar industries employ 1.5 million fewer people than their pre-pandemic path would predict.** They are laying off workers at close to normal rates but hiring far fewer. In the industries where AI use is most widespread, the share of postings open to entry-level candidates was 3–8% below its 2021–26 average in the year to June 2026.

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3. **Young graduates are feeling the squeeze on entry-level jobs.** The employment rate of new graduates in the most AI-exposed majors, about 40% of all graduates, has fallen about 3 percentage points relative to graduates of less-exposed majors since 2022.

4. **On step-up moves, AI can help a newcomer close nearly a third of the skills gap, but on almost half of it, AI mainly helps people who already have the skills.** While this may open new doors in some domains it could widen the edge experienced workers hold in others.

5. **Communication and collaboration are becoming the common ground on many routes up.** On almost one in four step-up moves, the starting job and the destination were more alike in each year from 2023 through 2025 than in 2022. Customer service representatives and management analysts, for example, became 10% more alike in the skills employers seek.

6. **Some routes out of customer-facing jobs are drawing a growing share of workers.** On about one in ten step-up moves, the share of people leaving the starting job who make the move has risen by at least a quarter since 2017–19, often from customer service, food service, and retail into graduate work such as financial advising, event planning, and marketing.

7. **The workers who most need a bridge have the fewest.** Workers without a bachelor's degree hold 80% of the jobs that tilt toward automation, compared with 64% of all jobs, but most step-up paths out of those jobs lead into work that asks for a degree.

The findings point to four priorities, set out in full in the final section:

PRIORITIES

- **Workers, students, and training providers need to focus on communication, problem solving, and collaboration.** Employers increasingly ask for these skills as AI takes on routine work. Students need more practice in them, and workers need better ways to prove they have them.
- **Employers need to keep hiring and training entry-level workers.** Employers who cut entry-level hiring now risk a shortage of experienced staff in the 2030s, and will then have to compete for costlier outside hires. As AI takes on more routine tasks, mentoring, rotations, and supervised practice can help new hires develop judgment.
- **Colleges and training providers need to build the first rung into the course.** More of the experience junior roles used to provide has to come before graduation, through co-ops, apprenticeships, and projects designed with employers. Programs also need to teach students to use AI in their field's work.
- **States and other public funders need to invest in training pathways into growing, resilient careers.** Public training funds can help workers in jobs that tilt toward automation build the skills and credentials to move into occupations that are hiring.

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FINDING 1

Jobs Are Growing Where AI Could Help Workers, and Shrinking Where AI Could Do the Work

The debate about AI and work often turns on how many jobs AI will destroy. A more useful question is where demand for workers is rising and where it is falling, and how that lines up with what AI can do, because the answer tells workers where to build skills and tells employers and educators where the first jobs of the future will be. The pattern so far is clear: employment has grown in occupations where the balance of tasks tilts toward work AI could help people do, and shrunk in those where the balance tilts toward work AI could do itself. Among the occupations where employment has fallen are clerical and customer service roles that have long served as entry points to office careers.

WHY IT MATTERS

The risk to a job depends not just on whether AI can help with the work, but on how much it can do on its own. Employers increasingly ask for judgment-based skills – for example, leadership, negotiation, and decision-making – that can be hard to learn without practice. The question is how young workers will build that experience if AI automates the entry-level tasks that traditionally gave them a way in.

Jobs where AI could help workers have pulled ahead since 2023

Customer service representatives and software developers are almost equally exposed to AI, but AI is likely to directly automate much of the first job and to help workers be more productive while still requiring a human in the loop for the second.

Since 2023, employment in the first has fallen and in the second has grown. We rate each task in an occupation on two questions: could AI do it alone (automation), and could AI help a person do it faster or better (augmentation)? An occupation's exposure is how much of its work AI can touch: the share of its tasks that rate highly on either. Its tilt is the balance between the two – whether AI is more likely to help the people doing the job or to do much of the work itself. Tilt, not exposure, is what separates the jobs that have grown from those that have shrunk. Among the one-third of occupations most exposed to AI, employment in those that tilt toward automation fell by about 820,000 between May 2023 and May 2025, while employment in those that tilt toward augmentation grew by 1.4 million.

The gap has widened (Figure 1). Within the same industries, the fifth of occupations that tilt most toward automation kept pace with the average job in 2015–19 but have grown 2.3 percentage points a year more slowly since 2023. The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the gap to last, projecting 89% of augmentation-leaning occupations to grow through 2035 – versus 45% of automation-leaning ones.

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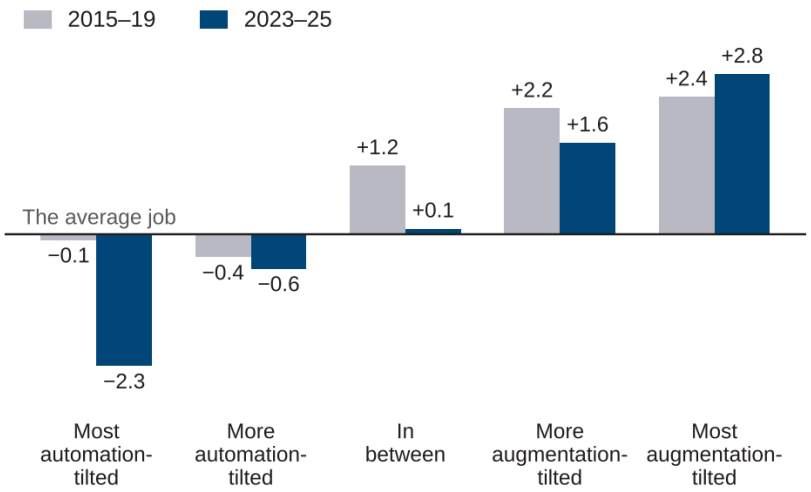
The declines are concentrated in administrative, clerical, sales support, and customer service roles. These middle-skill jobs have traditionally been a pathway into the middle class for many people, especially those without a college degree. Office and administrative support jobs fell by 780,000 between 2023 and 2025, while management, business and financial jobs rose by more than a million. Across all jobs in the occupations in Figure 1, employment in the middle third by pay – roughly $45,000 to $68,000 a year – shrank by about 1.2% a year in 2023–25, after growing about 1% a year in 2015–19. Higher-wage jobs may still be at risk, and some, such as computer programmers, are already shrinking, but taken together the best-paid third are still growing, if more slowly: about 0.8% a year in 2023–25, down from 2.4%. These are net changes, and AI is one likely factor among several.

Figure 1 Since 2023, jobs where AI could help workers have pulled ahead of jobs where AI could do much of the work

Yearly job growth compared with the average job, 2015–19 and 2023–25, in percentage points a year



Percentage points a year above or below the average job, after taking out differences in industry growth. The average job grew 0.7% a year in 2015–19 and 0.2% in 2023–25. Occupations are split into five equal groups by tilt. Source: BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics; BGI task-level AI exposure ratings; Burning Glass Institute analysis.

Demand is shifting from routine tasks toward judgment

Between 2023 and 2025, the number of computer programmers fell by 12.5% annually, while the number of data scientists rose by 16.7% a year. Within the same line of work, routine roles are shrinking while judgment-heavy roles grow (Figure 2).

The same shift shows up in the skills employers seek. Job postings for managers now ask more often for decision making, and less often for writing. Postings for secretaries ask more often for leadership and professionalism, and less often for clerical work and PowerPoint. Postings for sales representatives ask more often for sales strategy and negotiation, and less often for Microsoft Word and computer literacy (Figure 3). Across all job postings, routine skills – the skills AI is most able to perform on its own – made up 34.0% of the skills employers named in 2018–22 and 31.1% in 2023–25, a fall of 8.6%. Entry-level postings moved the same way: between 2019 and 2025, the share mentioning working with stakeholders rose from 4.2% to 7.2% – a gain of 71% – while the share mentioning interpersonal skills increased from 15.8% to 21.5%, a gain of 36%.

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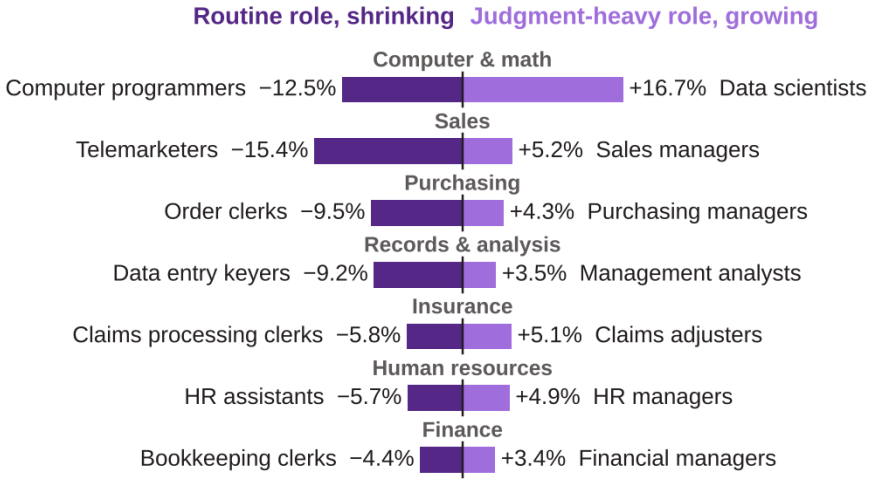
Figure 2 Within the same line of work, routine roles are shrinking and judgment-heavy roles are growing

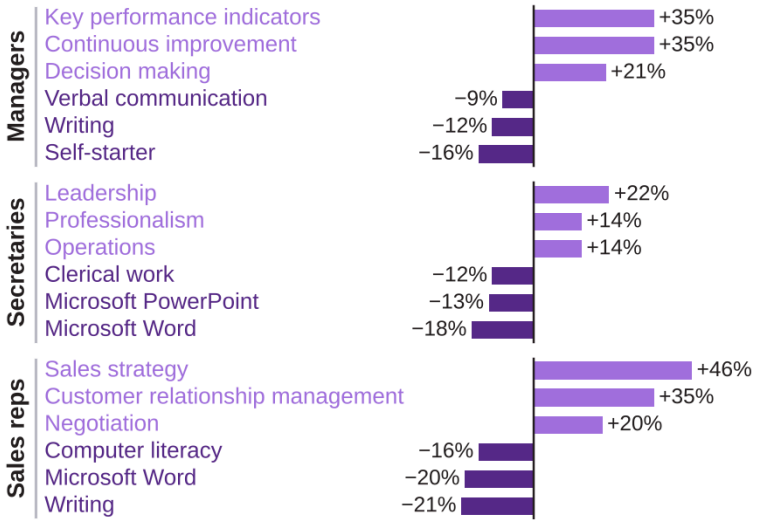
Annual change in U.S. employment, May 2023 to May 2025



Compound annual change between the May 2023 and May 2025 national estimates; each pair is the routine and the judgment-heavy role in the same line of work. Source: BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics; Burning Glass Institute analysis.

Figure 3 Employers are asking less for routine skills and more for judgment

Percent change in each skill's share of job postings, 2023–25 against 2018–22: the three largest rises and falls in three occupations



Managers are management occupations; secretaries are secretaries and administrative assistants; sales reps are sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing. For example, Microsoft Word appeared in 13.6% of postings for secretaries and administrative assistants in 2018–22 and 11.2% in 2023–25, a fall of 18%. Retail sales is left out of the sales reps' falls: its decline is likely to reflect which industries are hiring, not the skills the job needs. Source: Burning Glass Institute analysis of U.S. online job postings.

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FINDING 2

There Are 1.5 Million Fewer Jobs in White-Collar Industries Than You Would Expect Given Their Pre-Pandemic Trajectory

The skills employers now value most are learned on the job. The question we now turn to is whether the entry-level jobs that teach those skills are holding up. In white-collar industries, hiring has slowed: those industries employ far fewer people than if they had kept up their previous growth trajectory. Across the economy as a whole, entry-level openings have held their share of job postings. But in the industries where AI is most widely used, junior roles make up a smaller share of the jobs on offer.

WHY IT MATTERS

Slower hiring and a shrinking share of openings for beginners harm young workers now and employers later. Declining to hire junior staff today starves the talent pipeline of senior staff employers will need in the 2030s – often in occupations that already face worker shortages.

White-collar industries are hiring less, not laying off more

As of August 2026, finance, insurance, information, and professional and business services employed 31.9 million people, about 1.5 million fewer than would be expected given their previous growth trajectory from 2005 to 2019 (Figure 4). The shortfall is in total employment, not only entry-level jobs. But when demand softens, employers tend to slow hiring rather than let existing staff go, so the cost falls hardest on people trying to get in, including new graduates. Since April 2023, employment in the same industries has fallen by about 700,000 while the rest of the economy added 4.4 million jobs, with no recession. Layoff rates in these industries are close to normal, but hiring rates are well below their pre-pandemic levels. The missing workers aren't being laid off – they're not being hired in the first place.

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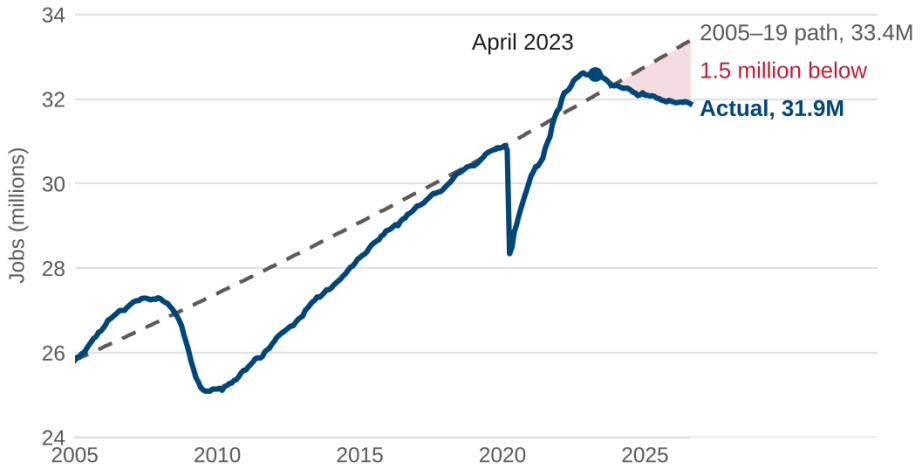
Figure 4 The white-collar jobs that never arrived

Jobs in finance, insurance, information, and professional and business services, against the path they were on from 2005 to 2019 (millions)



The path runs at a constant growth rate from actual employment in January 2005 to actual employment in December 2019 (1.2% a year), continued forward. Employment is seasonally adjusted, through August 2026. The shortfall is a net figure: it reflects technology of all kinds, offshoring, and any jobs AI has created. Source: BLS Current Employment Statistics; Burning Glass Institute analysis.

A smaller share of job postings is open to entry-level candidates in AI-adopting industries

The overall hiring slowdown raises a further question: how does AI use relate to the experience level employers are seeking? To explore that, we compare the share of postings specifying three years' experience or less across industries, using BGI's estimate of the share of firms in each industry that use AI. Postings that don't state an experience requirement are included in the total but not counted as open to beginners.

In industries where AI use is most widespread, the average quarterly share of postings open to junior candidates was lower in the year ending June 2026 than its average from January 2021 through June 2026. In educational services and information – two industries where AI use is among the most widespread – the shares were 7.6% and 4.6% lower, respectively. In industries where AI use is less widespread, the share tended to be higher than its longer-term average (Figure 5).

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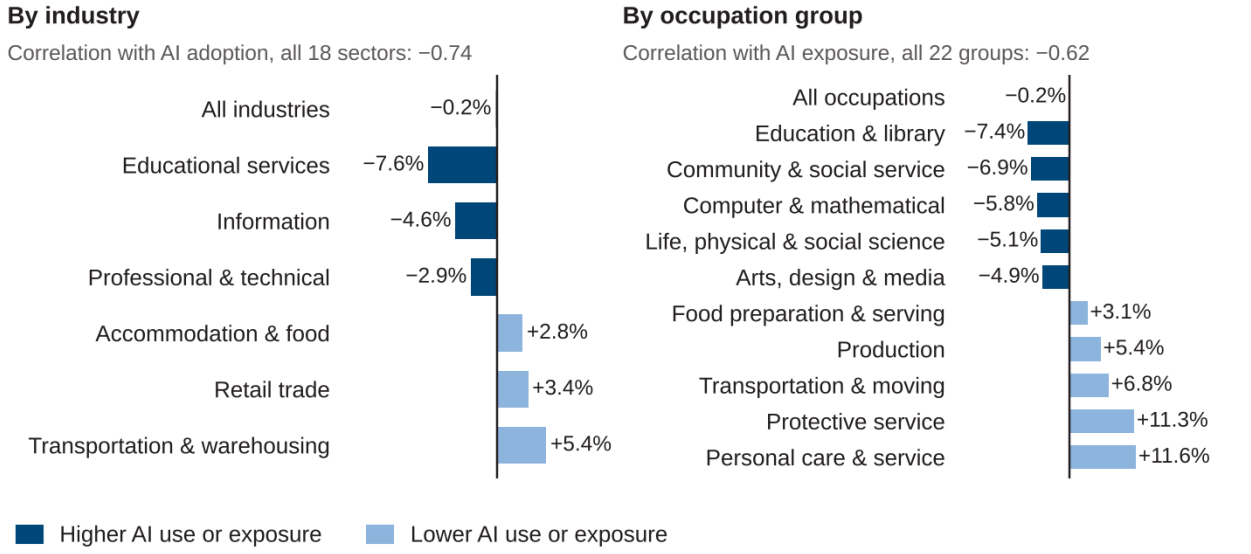
Figure 5 A smaller share of job postings is open to entry-level candidates in AI-adopting industries and AI-exposed occupations

Percent change in the share of job postings asking for 0–3 years' experience, July 2025–June 2026 against each group's own average for January 2021–June 2026



Changes are percent changes in the entry-level share, not percentage-point changes: in information, for example, the share averaged 27.3% from January 2021 to June 2026 and was 26.1% in the year to June 2026, a fall of 4.6%. Industries are grouped by BGI's estimate of the share of firms using AI; the occupation groups shown are the five largest falls and rises among 22. Source: Burning Glass Institute analysis of U.S. online job postings, January 2021 to June 2026; BGI industry AI adoption rate; BGI task-level AI exposure ratings.

Across the 18 industries analyzed, those with a higher estimated share of firms using AI tended to have a larger decline in the share of entry-level postings, relative to their 2021–26 average. We see the same pattern across occupations. Among 22 broad occupation groups, the more of a group's work is exposed to AI, the further its entry-level share has tended to fall below its 2021–26 average (Figure 5, right).

This is not to say that every employer is pulling back. Across all job postings, the entry-level share has barely moved (−0.2%), and the 50 employers posting the most jobs have raised their entry-level share by 3.7%. But the pullback is concentrated where AI use is most widespread. Anthropic, which builds AI models, reported in October 2026 that the junior share of its technical hires had fallen from 27% to 9%.[1]

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FINDING 3

Young Graduates Are the First to Feel the Squeeze on Entry-Level Jobs

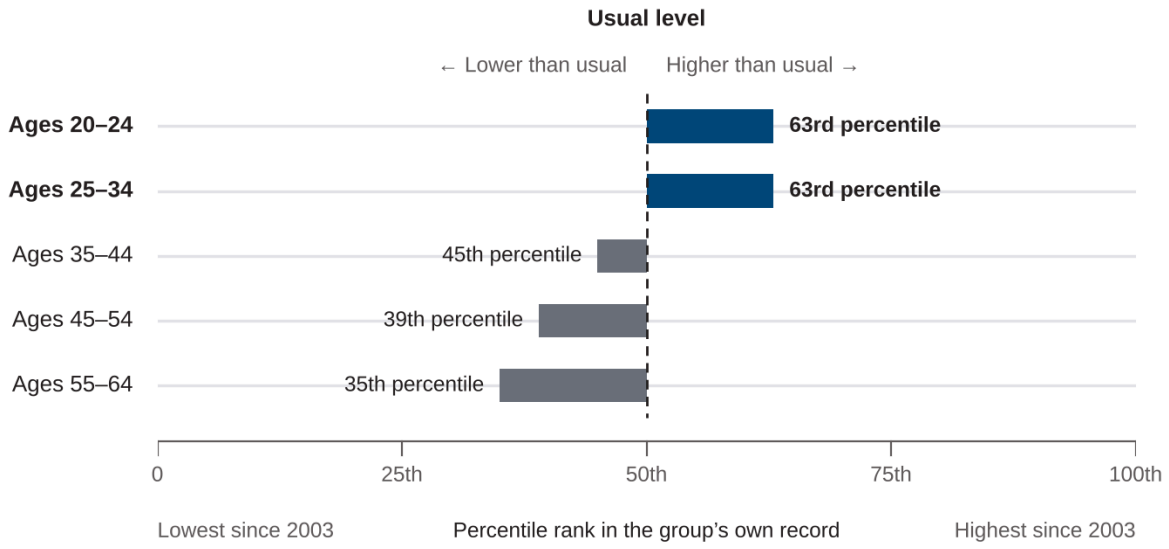
Young graduates are where a squeeze on entry-level jobs should show up first, because they have the least experience to fall back on. The evidence suggests the squeeze has reached them: unemployment is above its usual level for young graduates and below it for older ones, and since 2022 graduates of the majors most exposed to AI have become less likely to be in work soon after graduating, relative to graduates of other majors.

WHY IT MATTERS

Entry-level jobs give graduates a chance to develop judgment through experience. If employers offer fewer junior roles, colleges will need to build more of that experience into the degree itself, through co-ops, placements, and projects with real clients.

Figure 6 Young graduates' unemployment ranks above the 50th percentile of its record since 2003, and older graduates' below it

Percentile rank of each age group's unemployment rate in its own record since 2003, where the 50th percentile is the group's usual level and the 100th its highest



Each group's unemployment rate, averaged over the two years to August 2026, is ranked against its two-year averages in every month since January 2003. At the 63rd percentile, the rate was lower in more than 60% of those months; the dashed line marks the 50th percentile, the group's usual level. College graduates are people in the labor force whose highest qualification is a bachelor's degree. Source: Current Population Survey basic monthly microdata (IPUMS CPS); Burning Glass Institute analysis.

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Unemployment is higher than usual for young graduates

For graduates aged 20–24 and 25–34, unemployment is now higher than it has been in more than 60% of months since 2003, placing it in the 63rd percentile of each group's own record. For graduates aged 55–64, it is in the 35th percentile, lower than in about two-thirds of those months (Figure 6). The comparison uses a rolling two-year average for each month. Among younger graduates, unemployment is furthest above its usual level for those working in science, technology and engineering.

Graduates of the majors most exposed to AI have fallen behind in finding work

A study by economists at the U.S. Census Bureau points the same way.[2] It follows bachelor's graduates from more than 350 colleges in 24 states into the workforce. It groups their majors into tenths by how exposed to AI the jobs are that graduates of each major typically hold.

The change is sharpest for the most exposed tenth, whose majors are mostly computer science and related fields. Since 2022, the share of these graduates with a job in the three months after graduation has fallen about 5 percentage points relative to graduates of the least exposed majors (the bottom six-tenths). Among those in work for the full quarter, earnings two quarters after graduation are down about 13% on the same comparison.

Graduates in the next three most exposed tenths saw smaller declines. Across the four most exposed tenths, which together account for about two in five graduates, the employment rate in the three months after graduation has fallen about 3 percentage points relative to graduates of the least exposed majors since 2022. That figure is our average of the study's estimates, weighted by the number of graduates in each tenth.

The gaps narrow as graduates spend longer in the workforce. For the most exposed tenth, they remain two years after graduation.

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FINDING 4

AI Can Help Workers Move Up, but It May Also Widen the Advantage of Experience

Across the economy, the share of job postings open to beginners has held up. But in traditional office jobs, and in the industries where AI is most widely used, the first rung of the career ladder is getting harder to reach. More people will need to arrive in those jobs by alternative paths: from another occupation, with some of the relevant skills already in hand. Workers have always made moves like this. The question is whether AI makes more of these moves possible, and for whom.

The short answer is yes, up to a point. Across the step-up moves studied, AI could help a newcomer address nearly a third of the skills gap, on a gap-weighted average. At the same time, for almost half of the skills gap, AI mainly helps people who already have the skills become more effective – potentially widening the advantage of experience and expertise.

> **WHY IT MATTERS**
>
> AI cannot replace human experience. If technology gives seasoned workers an even greater edge, newcomers will still need a way to catch up. Employers seeking talent from other occupations will have to build those skills intentionally, through mentoring, rotations, and supervised practice.

Whether AI can help depends on which skills a worker is missing

Consider a bank teller moving into accounting. A teller already handles money and customers every day; what a teller typically lacks are skills such as advanced spreadsheet work and accounting principles. The difference between what the two jobs' postings ask for gives us an estimate of the skills gap a worker may need to address.

To measure how far AI can help close gaps like this, we looked at 2,741 well-established step-up moves: moves people often make into occupations that are short of workers or starting to face shortages. The destination jobs pay around the same or more, typically require at least as much education, and tilt further than the starting job toward AI helping workers rather than doing their work. For each move, we estimated the skills gap by comparing how often postings for the starting and destination jobs ask for skills distinctive to the destination role. The gap reflects skills the destination's postings ask for more often, weighted by the difference in frequency. We then sorted those skills into four types according to whether AI can perform the work, help a newcomer, help an experienced worker, or has limited reach:

- **AI handles it.** The work can be handed to AI almost entirely, and errors are easy to spot or cheap to fix. Examples are spreadsheet formulas, basic programming, and data entry.
- **AI coaches a newcomer.** With AI alongside, someone new to the skill can produce work an employer would accept. Examples are customer service and research.

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- **AI speeds up experts.** AI makes people who already have the skill faster and better, but only someone with the skill can direct AI and check its work. Examples are leadership, budgeting, and project management. Someone making the move still has to learn these skills.
- **Human core.** These are skills built through experience, physical practice, presence, or credentials, and largely out of AI's reach. Examples are using hand tools, caring for patients, and performing surgery.

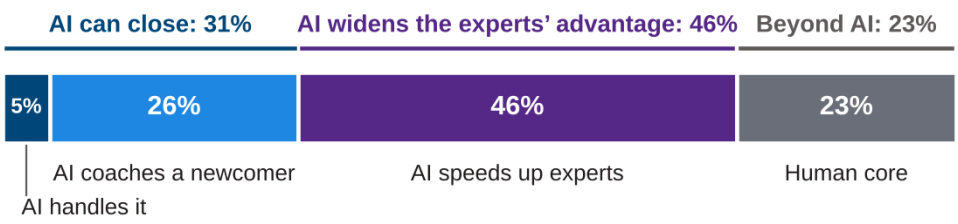
Across step-up moves, AI can help with nearly a third of the skills gap

For a bank teller moving into accounting, AI could help close nearly three-quarters of the skills gap. However, AI cuts both ways (Figure 7). For a customer service representative transitioning into management analysis, it could help with just over a third; much of the remaining gap is in skills where AI mainly helps experienced workers.

Across the 2,741 moves, AI can help a newcomer address 31% of the skills gap, on a gap-weighted average (Figure 7). That includes skills in the "AI handles it" (5%) and "AI coaches a newcomer" (26%) categories. But another 46% fall into the "AI speeds up experts" group – skills where AI mainly makes people who already have the skill faster and better. In those areas, AI may widen the advantage experienced workers hold over newcomers, even as it builds bridges elsewhere. The remaining 23% of the gap is "human core": skills that are largely outside AI's reach, including hands-on and credentialed skills.

Figure 7 Across step-up moves, AI could help newcomers with nearly a third of the skills gap

Share of the skills gap by type, pooled across 2,741 step-up career moves



Pooled across 2,741 well-established moves, all into occupations facing or starting to face a shortage of workers, weighting each by the size of its gap; the appendix sets out the tests each move passes. Source: BGI career-history data; BGI job postings; BGI skills taxonomy; BLS.

AI helps most on moves into technical work, and least on moves into management and care

A claims adjuster moving into data science mostly lacks tools that AI can use or teach; a travel agent moving into sales management mostly lacks leadership, business development and negotiation – skills AI makes experienced people better at, but which a newcomer still has to learn. How much AI helps varies by destination. Across moves into software development or data science, AI could help a newcomer address about four-fifths of the skills gap, on average; across moves into medical assisting or sales management, it could help with only around a quarter.

For workers and training providers, the lesson is that AI can help newcomers address more of the gap in technical and analytical work, alongside appropriate training. It does much less for the climb into management, sales leadership, or care, where newcomers still need experience.

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FINDING 5

Communication and Collaboration Are Becoming the Common Ground on Some Routes Up

Between 2022 and 2025, job postings for customer service representatives and management analysts both asked more often for problem solving, communication, and interpersonal skills, and the two jobs became 10.0% more alike in the skills employers ask for. That could bring a better-paid job a little closer for those in customer service roles.

Across the step-up moves in Finding 4, there is no steady trend of this kind. But for almost one in four of the 2,502 moves where we could measure similarity, the starting job and destination were more alike in each year from 2023 through 2025 than in 2022. Those moves have a lot in common: most start in hands-on or customer-facing jobs and lead into specialist work rather than management. Communication and collaboration accounted for much of the increased similarity in the skills employers seek. That fits what we would expect if AI takes on more applied tasks – the formulaic writing, the basic code, the data entry – and leaves people with work that is more human, in which different jobs ask for more of the same things.

The pattern suggests routes where the skills employers seek in a worker's current job are increasingly relevant to a better-paid one. Employers can explore these routes when recruiting, while employers and training providers can focus on the skills that separate the two jobs – particularly those a newcomer cannot readily perform with AI's help.

WHY IT MATTERS

On the routes where two jobs are becoming more alike, communication and collaboration are increasingly common ground. For employers, these shared skills may help identify promising candidates from other occupations, while AI may help newcomers address some technical gaps. Colleges and training providers can help by teaching durable skills through practice and giving students ways to demonstrate them that employers trust, alongside the technical skills their chosen routes require.

For almost one in four step-ups, the starting and destination jobs are growing more alike

Six such moves serve as examples of what this looks like (Figure 8). Between 2022 and 2025, restaurant hosts and event planners became 19.0% more alike in the skills employers ask for, nursing assistants and registered nurses 14.6%, and retail salespersons and market research analysts 7.0%.

To find these moves, we measured, for each step-up, how much the skills employers ask for in the two jobs' postings overlap in each year from 2022 to 2025. On 590 of the 2,502 step-ups we can measure – almost one in four – the overlap was larger in each of 2023, 2024, and 2025 than in 2022, and by 2025 the two jobs were

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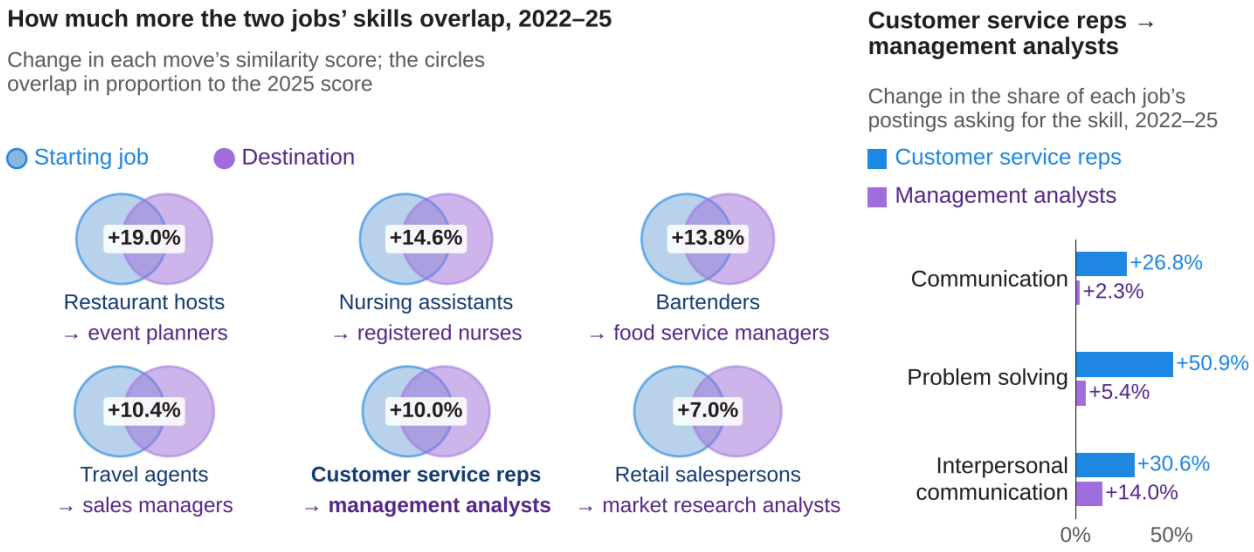
7.1% more alike than in 2022. These moves account for almost a quarter of the people making step-up moves.

Figure 8 For some step-ups, the two jobs became more alike in the skills employers seek

Change in how alike each move's starting job and destination were in the skills employers sought, 2022–25; right, changes in how often postings for customer service representatives and management analysts asked for three skills that contributed to their increased similarity



Similarity is BGI's measure of how alike two occupations' skill profiles are, rebuilt each year from BGI's skill tables with every skill at full weight. The circles overlap in proportion to each pair's 2025 score, and the figure in the middle is the percent change in that score since 2022. Five of the six moves run from a job held mostly by workers without a bachelor's degree into one held mostly by graduates; bartenders and food service managers are both held mostly by workers without a degree. In each move, the two jobs were more alike in every year from 2023 to 2025 than in 2022; the six are examples, not typical moves. Right: the percent change between 2022 and 2025 in the share of each job's postings that ask for each skill, for three of the durable skills that did most to raise the two jobs' similarity score and became more common in both jobs' postings. Source: Burning Glass Institute analysis of U.S. online job postings and career-history data.

Moves that are converging are doing so around communication and collaboration

Customer service representatives and management analysts show how this works (Figure 8, right): problem solving and communication alone account for more than two-thirds of the rise in the two jobs' similarity. Across all 590 converging moves, communication and collaboration did most of the work in drawing the two jobs together: communication accounts for more than a third of the rise in similarity, and collaboration for almost a fifth. Interpersonal skills, stakeholder management, attention to detail, organization and problem solving add another two-fifths. The implication for education is clear: students need to build real proficiency in communication and collaboration, and workers need better ways to prove they have them.

The converging moves also have two things in common. The first is where they start. More than half start in a job that tilts toward automation, against 43% of all step-ups, and convergence is most common on moves out of hands-on and customer-facing work: seven in ten step-ups out of healthcare support jobs such as nursing assistant converged, as did 44% of those out of food service and 38% of those out of sales, against fewer than one in ten out of business, finance and management jobs.

The second is where they lead: into specialist work rather than management. About a third of the step-ups into healthcare, education, engineering and computing converged, against one in eight into management.

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FINDING 6

Some Routes Out of Customer-Facing Jobs Are Drawing a Growing Share of Workers

Customer service representative to personal financial advisor, fast food worker to event planner, retail salesperson to fundraising manager: the share of job switchers making each of these moves more than doubled in 2023–25 compared with 2017–19.

Convergence shows where two jobs are drawing closer. It does not show whether workers are taking the route. For that, we turn to career histories and ask which step-ups are drawing a growing share of the people who leave the starting job. Most step-ups have moved roughly in line with the general shift toward better-paid work. But about one in ten, like these three, has drawn a markedly larger share of workers in recent years than before the pandemic. These moves, too, have a lot in common: most are bigger leaps into graduate work, and nearly half start in customer-facing jobs. For the people in those jobs, these routes into professional work have become more common, including for workers without a degree. In practice, these are proven routes: employers can recruit along them, and colleges, training providers, and workforce boards can make them shorter and easier to take.

WHY IT MATTERS

Rising take-up is a sign that a route is realistic as well as rewarding: a growing share of workers leaving the initial role are making the leap. For employers, these are the routes on which candidates from customer-facing jobs are already proving themselves. For workforce boards, colleges, and training providers, they are the routes most worth promoting to workers and backing with short, practical programs.

About one in ten step-ups is drawing a growing share of workers

Six such moves show the range (Figure 9). Among people leaving each starting occupation, the share moving from bank tellers to financial advisors rose by 81%, from customer service representatives to sales manager by 79%, and from computer support specialists to information security analyst by 43%.

To find these moves, we measured, for each of the 2,741 step-up moves, the share of people leaving the starting job whose next job was the destination, in 2017–19 and in 2023–25. Career histories fill in over time: people often add a new job to their online profile well after starting it, and moves into better jobs tend to be added sooner than others, so the latest years can overstate a rise. To guard against that, we count a move only if its share rose by at least a quarter, the rise is too large to be chance, and a rise of at least a quarter

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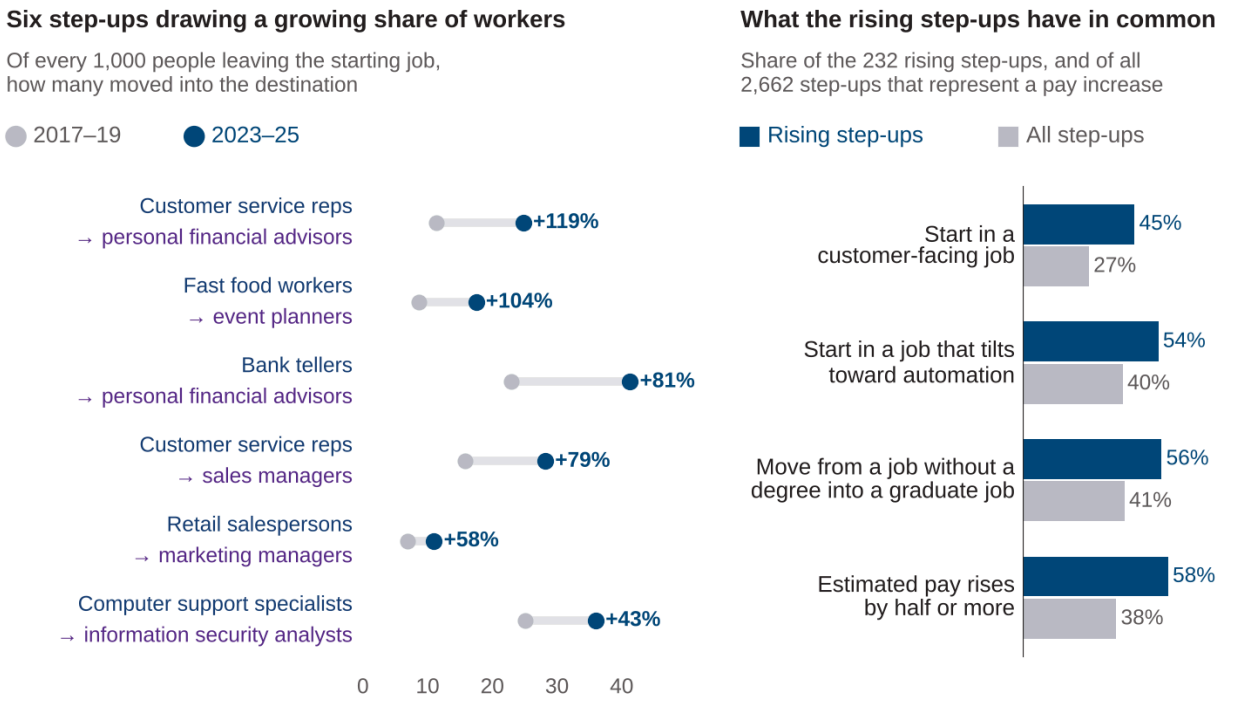
was already there by 2021–23 – both in today's data and in the version compiled two years ago, when those years were the newest. Of the 2,662 step-ups made often enough to measure, 232 – about one in ten – pass that test. On these moves, the share typically rose by 62%, against 7% for step-ups as a whole.

Figure 9 Some step-ups out of customer-facing jobs are drawing a growing share of workers

Of every 1,000 people leaving the starting job, how many moved into the destination, 2017–19 and 2023–25; right, what the 232 step-ups drawing a growing share of workers have in common



A move is a person's next job in a different occupation, starting within a year of leaving the last one, by the year the new job starts. A step-up counts as drawing a growing share of workers if the share of people leaving the starting job who move into the destination rose by at least a quarter between 2017–19 and 2023–25, by more than chance would explain, and a rise of at least a quarter by 2021–23 appears both in today's data and in the version compiled two years earlier. Customer-facing jobs are those in food service, sales, and personal care and service, plus customer service representatives, receptionists, hotel desk clerks and bank tellers. Pay rises are estimates, from pay at the points in each job's pay range where people making the move typically leave and arrive. Source: BGI career-history data; Burning Glass Institute analysis.

The rising moves are bigger leaps, often out of customer-facing jobs

Take retail salespersons moving into marketing management. It leads from the shop floor into a job held mostly by graduates, and is estimated to more than double pay. Between 2017–19 and 2023–25, the share of retail salespersons changing occupations who made it rose 58%.

The rising moves have three things in common (Figure 9, right). First, nearly half start in customer-facing jobs: 45% start in food service, sales, personal care, customer service, front-desk work, or bank teller roles, compared with 27% of all step-ups. About a third of the step-ups out of food service are drawing a growing share of workers. Second, most cross the degree line: 56% run from a job held mostly by workers without a degree into one held mostly by graduates, compared to 41% of all step-ups, and a similar share start in a job

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that tilts toward automation. Third, they are bigger leaps. The typical rising move brings an estimated pay rise of 64%, against 35% on other step-ups, and the skills gap is wider. Step-ups into computing, engineering and healthcare are the most likely to be rising, and step-ups into education and the arts the least.

How should we read this? AI may play a part, but the shift predates ChatGPT. The share of workers taking these routes was already rising before 2019 – by 15% between 2014–16 and 2017–19, while other step-ups held steady – and it has climbed at much the same pace each year since.

Nor is it mainly graduates who took service jobs during the pandemic and then moved on. About 57% of the people making these moves held a bachelor's degree, both in 2017–19 and in 2023–25, and among people leaving these starting jobs, the share taking one of these routes rose faster for those without a degree (by 70%) than for graduates (by 49%). The data point to a steady opening of these routes from customer-facing work into professional jobs; whether AI is now speeding that up is too early to tell.

These are not simply popular destinations drawing workers from everywhere: on nearly all of these moves, the share rose faster than the share of all job changes going into the same destination. For workers in customer-facing jobs, many of them the jobs AI is most able to do, that is encouraging: on these routes, a growing share of them are making some of the biggest moves up. But most of those moves lead into jobs that ask for a degree, which is where the next finding turns.

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FINDING 7

The Workers Who Most Need a Bridge Have the Fewest

Who can make moves like these? The question matters because the workers in the jobs that tilt toward automation are not, on the whole, the workers AI is most likely to help. The answer is uncomfortable: the workers who most need a bridge have the fewest within reach.

WHY IT MATTERS

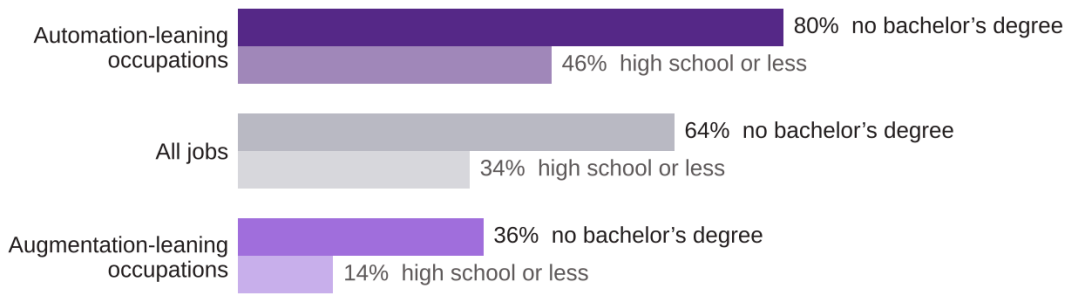
Left alone, the bridges AI could help build will mostly carry people who already hold a degree. Opening those paths to workers without one will take deliberate choices: employers hiring for the skills a job needs rather than for a degree it does not; training providers offering short, practical programs for the routes that don't require degrees; and public leaders directing training funds at those routes.

Workers without a degree hold most of the jobs that tilt toward automation

Across the whole economy, not just in offices, workers without a bachelor's degree hold 80% of the jobs in automation-leaning occupations, compared with 64% of all jobs (Figure 10). This group differs from the jobs most exposed to AI overall: 57% of the roles in the most *exposed* third of occupations (whether to automation or augmentation effects from AI) are held by people with a bachelor's degree or higher, and AI is more likely to make many of those workers more productive than to do their work.

Figure 10 Across all occupations, the jobs that tilt toward automation are mostly held by workers without a degree

Share of jobs held by workers without a bachelor's degree, and by workers with a high school diploma or less



By the education workers hold (American Community Survey, 2023–24), weighted by employment in May 2025. Automation- and augmentation-leaning occupations are the bottom and top thirds of occupations by tilt. Source: BLS Employment Projections; BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics; BGI task-level AI exposure ratings; Burning Glass Institute analysis.

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Put another way, six in ten jobs held by workers with a high school diploma or less are in automation-leaning occupations, compared with a quarter of the jobs held by graduates.

Most routes out of those jobs lead into work that asks for a degree

Of the 90 step-up moves out of retail sales work, 60 lead into a job that typically asks for a bachelor's degree, from market research analyst to registered nurse.

The pattern holds across all routes up. Many start in jobs that need no degree: 1,431 of the 2,741 step-up moves begin in a job that typically needs no bachelor's degree. But 1,202 of those 1,431 – more than four in five – lead into a job that typically asks for one. AI can help close a skills gap, and on some routes the two jobs' skills have converged, but technology does not supply a credential. That leaves a worker without a degree two choices: find an employer that hires on skills rather than credentials, or go back to earn a degree. There are signs that the first option is opening up. About 40% of the people who cross the degree line have no degree when they move. On the step-ups drawing a growing share of workers in Finding 6, the share of people leaving the starting job who took the route also rose faster among those without a degree than among graduates. That suggests some employers may already be hiring for these jobs based on skills rather than credentials.

AI helps less where no degree is needed

Take a cashier moving into medical assisting. Most of what the move asks a worker to learn is hands-on or credentialed skill – taking vital signs, drawing blood, operating equipment – and AI can help close only about a quarter of the gap. Routes from food service and retail sales into medical assisting look much the same. Only 229 of the 2,741 moves run between two jobs that need no degree, and those moves are harder for AI to help with. Across moves between two jobs that typically need no degree, hands-on or credentialed skills account for 46% of the gap, while AI can help with only 17%. By contrast, across moves between two jobs that typically require a degree, the corresponding figures are 22% and 31%, respectively.

Workers in jobs that tilt toward automation face two obstacles. Most better-paid jobs within reach require a degree they may not have, and for those that don't, the skills they need require hands-on, supervised practice.

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What This Means

The findings point to clear priorities. The evidence describes what is happening rather than proving why, but it is consistent enough to act on, starting with skills.

- **Prioritize durable skills.** Communication, problem solving, judgment, and working with others are increasingly in demand and shared across many jobs, so they pay off regardless of which move a worker makes.
- **Rote skills are worth less than in the past.** Proficiency in using particular tools and carrying out routine tasks is becoming less important and more specific to individual career paths. Where AI is poised to take over routine tasks, workers benefit from focusing on durable skills.

For employers

- **Keep hiring and training entry-level talent.** Cutting junior hiring saves money this year, but it removes the people who would be senior talent in a decade – in occupations that are often already short of workers. Junior hires also cost less than the experienced hires employers would otherwise compete for, and new graduates may bring habits of working with AI that more experienced staff are still building.
- **Cultivate judgment deliberately.** If AI takes over the routine work that used to train entry-level workers, employers will need rotations, mentoring, and structured apprenticeships to build that experience instead.
- **Recruit talent with relevant skills, even if from atypical backgrounds.** Career histories point to workers in other occupations who already bring part of what a role requests – a pool most recruiters do not search. Customer-facing jobs are a good place to start: on routes into financial advising, event planning, and marketing, for example, a growing share of workers leaving customer-facing roles are making the move. Routes like these offer blueprints for employers to test against their own hiring pipelines.

For colleges and training providers

- **Build the first rung into the course.** If employers offer fewer junior roles, more of the experience those roles used to provide will need to come before graduation – through co-ops, apprenticeships, placements, and projects with real clients. Northeastern University's co-op program, which builds paid work placements into the degree, shows what this can look like.
- **Make applied AI skills part of every program.** AI can only help close skills gaps for workers equipped to use it.
- **Teach durable skills intentionally and help students prove them.** Where jobs are becoming more alike, communication and collaboration are increasingly the common ground. Programs need to build these

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skills through practice, not just list them as outcomes, and give students ways to demonstrate them that employers trust.

- **Consider short programs targeting specific transitions.** Career histories suggest where a short program may be worth exploring with local employers. For example, moving from retail or food service into medical assisting requires clinical skills that a focused program could help workers learn.

For state and local leaders

- **Prioritize routes that need no degree.** Left alone, AI's gains disproportionately benefit people who already have the skills. Public training funds can favor programs for routes that need no degree and help workers without degrees build the skills and qualifications for jobs that have traditionally asked for one.
- **Present workers with real and resilient options for moving up.** Workforce boards and career services could show workers specific moves that people like them already make, particularly routes that are becoming more common.
- **Give workers a credible way to prove their skills.** Durable skills are hard to see on a resume. Assessments, portfolios, and work-based credentials that employers recognize would help workers demonstrate those skills and help employers hire based on them.
- **Support workers in jobs that tilt toward automation.** Not everyone in an automation-leaning job will cross a bridge. Early warning of job cuts, income support during retraining, and help finding related jobs matter too.

Conclusion

Work is shifting toward jobs AI could make more productive, and away from the routine work that used to teach beginners the judgment employers increasingly prize. AI can lower the cost of learning unfamiliar work in some areas but can widen the advantage of experienced workers in others. There are routes into better-paid work for new graduates and workers without degrees, many of which predate generative AI. Some of those routes are becoming more common, including moves from customer-facing and other jobs into fields such as financial advising, event planning and information security. Making those moves more common is a matter of where employers look for talent, whether training concentrates on durable and applied AI skills, and whether hiring processes are open to candidates who can do the work but arrive by an unfamiliar route.

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NOTES

1. Nathan Wilmers, Regina Catipon, Maxim Massenkoff, and Peter McCrory, “How employment is changing at Anthropic,” Anthropic, October 16, 2026, https://www.anthropic.com/research/employment-at-anthropic.
2. Cody Orr, Lee C. Tucker, and Lawrence Warren, “Graduating into Disruption: Labor Market Outcomes for AI-Exposed College Majors,” U.S. Census Bureau Center for Economic Studies Working Paper CES-26-56, September 2026, https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2026/adrm/CES-WP-26-56.html.
3. U.S. Census Bureau, Business Trends and Outlook Survey (BTOS), https://www.census.gov/hfp/btos.
4. Ramp Economics Lab, Ramp AI Index, https://ramp.com/data/ai-index.
5. IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. The underlying Current Population Survey data are collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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APPENDIX

Data and Methodology

About the evidence

The analysis combines several sources, described in full below.

- Job postings. BGI's database of U.S. online job postings, 2018 to mid-2026, with staffing firms excluded. A posting counts as entry-level if it asks for three years' experience or less.
- AI and occupations. The Burning Glass Institute scores the tasks that make up each occupation for how far AI can do them alone (automation) and how far it helps a person do them (augmentation). An occupation's *tilt* is the balance between the two.
- Career moves. BGI's career-history data, built from millions of U.S. resumes and online profiles, shows how often workers move from one occupation to another.
- Official statistics. Employment, pay, projections and the education workers hold, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics; unemployment from the Current Population Survey; and a Census Bureau study of new graduates' employment and earnings.

None of these sources can isolate the effect of AI from everything else that has happened to the labor market since 2022, including higher interest rates, increased incidence of working from home, and the unwinding of pandemic-era hiring. We describe where the patterns line up with AI adoption and exposure, and say where other explanations remain open.

Entry-level share of job postings

Postings are from BGI's database of U.S. online job postings, January 2021 to June 2026, excluding staffing firms. A posting is deemed entry-level if its minimum required experience is three years or less; postings that state no requirement remain in the denominator. For each industry sector (two-digit NAICS), the baseline is the mean of the 22 quarterly shares from January 2021 to June 2026, and the latest value is the mean of the last four quarters, July 2025 to June 2026. The same measure is computed for the 22 major occupation groups, set against each group's exposure to AI, and for the 50 employers with the most postings over 2021–26.

To compare industries by AI adoption, we use the Burning Glass Institute's estimate of the share of firms using AI in each sector. BGI estimates adoption monthly for 82 U.S. industries, from January 2021 to May 2026, using three sources: Census Bureau surveys asking businesses whether they use AI[3], BGI data on the share of job postings involving AI-related roles, and Ramp data on business spending on AI tools[4]. The model also accounts for differences in industries' exposure to AI and the attention AI receives in industry news. For this analysis, the 82 three-digit NAICS industries are aggregated into 18 two-digit sectors.

To maintain consistency over time, BGI adjusts for a change in the Census survey wording in November 2025, retaining the original definition: AI used "in producing goods or services." This is narrower than the Census Bureau's current headline measure, which includes AI use in any business function; BGI's estimates are therefore lower than that measure.

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The four sectors with the highest estimated adoption are information, educational services, professional and technical services, and finance and insurance.

Routine and judgment skills

Skill shares are computed on a 10% random sample of postings from 2018 to June 2026 (29 million postings and about 400 million skill mentions). Each skill named in a posting is matched to BGI's Skills+ scores for how far AI can perform the skill alone (automation) and how far it helps a person perform it (augmentation). Routine skills are those in the top third on automation. Judgment skills are those in the top third on augmentation and outside the top third on automation. The routine group is broader than clerical work: it includes SQL, Python, writing and data analysis. Shares compare 2023–25 with 2018–22. The entry-level figures use a 5% sample of postings asking for three years' experience or less; wording compares postings from two days a month in 2019 and 2025.

Employment by occupation, industry and tilt

Occupation employment is from the national Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics for May 2023 and May 2025. BLS builds these estimates from three years of pooled survey panels and cautions against reading them as a time series; changes in small occupations can reflect sampling. Figure 1 compares each occupation's growth with the average job after taking out differences in industry growth, and groups occupations into fifths by tilt. Figure 4 uses seasonally adjusted Current Employment Statistics, set against a path that runs at a constant growth rate between actual employment in January 2005 and December 2019. Hiring and layoff rates are from the BLS Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey. The thirds by pay in Finding 1 use the median annual wages that divide all U.S. jobs into three equal groups, about $44,600 and $67,800 in 2025 (BLS Employment Projections); their growth rates are averages for the occupations in Figure 1, weighted by employment, comparing the same occupations in 2015–19 and 2023–25.

Unemployment among graduates, and new graduates by major

The unemployment figures use the Current Population Survey basic monthly files (IPUMS CPS)[5] from January 2003 to August 2026, for people in the labor force aged 20–64 whose highest qualification is a bachelor's degree. For each group, we compute the weighted monthly unemployment rate, average it over 24 months, and rank each month's average within the group's own record since 2003. The results on new graduates by major draw on Orr, Tucker and Warren, "Graduating into Disruption: Labor Market Outcomes for AI-Exposed College Majors," U.S. Census Bureau Center for Economic Studies working paper 26-56 (September 2026). The paper links bachelor's graduates of more than 350 colleges in 24 states, about 29% of U.S. bachelor's degrees awarded in 2016–24, to state earnings records. It scores each major by the AI exposure of the occupations its young graduates hold and groups majors into tenths by that score; the four most exposed tenths account for about two in five graduates. Its estimates compare each of the four most exposed tenths with the least exposed six-tenths, relative to 2022, allowing for fixed differences between each college's programs, conditions at each college in each quarter, and each major's seasonal pattern. A graduate counts as employed with any earnings in the quarter after graduating; earnings are quarterly earnings in the main job of those employed for the full quarter, two quarters after graduating. The figures for the most exposed tenth are the paper's own. The employment figure for the four most exposed tenths together is our average of the paper's quarterly estimates for each tenth from 2023 to 2025, read from its charts and weighted by each tenth's number of graduates. The paper notes that the fall for the ninth tenth may partly reflect a return to its longer-run level rather than an effect of AI.

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AI exposure, tilt and who holds the jobs

BGI scores individual work tasks for exposure to AI automation and to AI augmentation and aggregates them to occupations, weighting tasks by their importance to the occupation. Tilt is the balance between the two: positive where AI is more likely to help the worker, negative where it is more likely to do the work. Automation-leaning and augmentation-leaning occupations are the bottom and top thirds by tilt. Projected employment change and typical entry-level education are from the BLS Employment Projections, 2025–35. The education workers hold is from the BLS Employment Projections attainment tables (American Community Survey, 2023–24), weighted by May 2025 employment.

The skills gap and the four types

For each pair of occupations, the skills gap is built from the skills that feature more prominently in the destination occupation's postings than in the job postings overall, and appear in at least 0.5% of its postings. For each such skill, we measure how much more often the destination's postings ask for it than the starting occupation's postings do, counting zero when the starting occupation asks for it as often or more. The gap is the sum of those shortfalls, expressed as a share of the destination's total demand for these skills. A gap of 0 means the starting occupation's postings ask for each of these skills at least as often as the destination's postings; a gap of 1 means they ask for none of them.

Each skill is assigned to one of four types by rule, using its automation and augmentation scores and a list of hands-on and credentialed skills. To get the overall figure, we average the four percentages across all 2,741 moves, weighting each move by the size of its gap: the share of the destination's distinctive skill demand that the starting role doesn't already meet. Moves with larger gaps count for more. This gives 5% for "AI handles it," 26% for "AI coaches a newcomer," 46% for "AI speeds up experts," and 23% for "human core."

Measuring how alike jobs have become

How alike two occupations have become derives from BGI's published measure of occupation similarity, rebuilt one year at a time from BGI's skill tables, 2022 to 2025, with every skill counted at the rate postings ask for it. The measure is a score from 0, for two jobs whose postings ask for none of the same skills, to 1, for two jobs whose postings ask for the same skills in the same proportions. An occupation is included if it has at least 500 postings in every year, its largest employer posts no more than 30% of its ads, and its skill profile does not change abruptly from one year to the next, which usually reflects a change in how postings were classified. Each move is matched to the occupations under its two codes; where a code covers several occupations, the move's score averages over the pairs. On this basis, 2,502 of the 2,741 step-up moves can be measured. A move counts as converging if its two jobs were more alike in each of 2023, 2024 and 2025 than in 2022. The shares of the skills gap for the converging moves, and for the moves drawing a growing share of workers, are pooled in the same way as in Finding 4. Because the score adds up skill by skill, the rise across the converging moves splits exactly into each skill's contribution. The postings data changed providers during 2025; a check on postings from a single provider whose coverage held steady shows that the change, if anything, understates convergence between jobs with and without a degree in 2025, so the test is strict. On those single-provider postings, which run to May 2026, the converging moves also held up better than other step-ups in early 2026, when similarity fell for most pairs of jobs as postings began listing more skills. A job is held mostly by graduates if at least half of its workers hold a bachelor's degree or higher (BLS Employment Projections; American Community Survey, 2023–24).

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Career moves

Moves are from BGI's career-history data. The 2,741 step-up moves are well-established moves that pass five tests. Each is made by at least 500 people in the career-history data, measured three and five years after they start in the first job. Each leads into an occupation that BGI's shortage indicator classes as in critical shortage or under emerging pressure. Pay does not fall by more than 10%, measured at the points in each job's pay range where people making the move typically leave and arrive. Pay changes are therefore estimates for a typical mover, not observed changes in any individual's pay; on these estimates, pay rises on 93% of the 2,741 moves. The destination typically needs at least as much education as the starting job. And the destination is more likely to be helped by AI than the starting job: its tilt – how far AI can help with its tasks, less how far AI can do them alone, both as percentiles – is higher. Typical education is what the Bureau of Labor Statistics says is typically needed to enter each occupation. Take-up uses every direct move between jobs in the same data: a person's next job in a different occupation, starting within a year of leaving the last one, counted in the year the new job starts. A step-up's take-up is the share of people leaving the starting job whose next job is the destination, pooled over 2017–19 and over 2023–25; 2,662 step-ups have at least 50 such moves in each period. Because people update their career histories over time, and recent moves into better jobs tend to appear sooner than other moves, a step-up counts as drawing a growing share of workers only if its take-up rose by at least a quarter, by more than twice its sampling error, and if a rise of at least a quarter between 2017–19 and 2021–23 appears both in the current version of the data and in a version compiled two years earlier. Moves that began in 2026 are left out because they are still being added: in the version compiled two years earlier, the first four months of its latest year held only about half the job starts that the current version now shows for them. A mover counts as a graduate if their education record shows a bachelor's degree or higher completed before the move. The career-history data over-represent graduates, so the shares of movers with a degree are higher than in the workforce as a whole.

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