



# Understanding the human cost of AI transformation

**Special report:** Uncovering the 'verification tax,' pre-AI nostalgia, and the potential white-collar exodus.

2026



A follow-up to Adaptavist's 2025 report, The human cost of digital transformation

# Table of contents

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>5</b>
The rise of 'pre-AI nostalgia'	
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>8</b>
AI fatigue and the missing 'why?'	
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....	<b>11</b>
The cognitive costs of AI at work	
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> .....	<b>15</b>
The white-collar exodus	
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>19</b>





## Foreword

From Tom Lasparini, Chief Operating Officer,  
The Adaptavist Group

When we published **The human cost of digital transformation** in 2025, we highlighted a growing reality: technology intended to improve how teams work, can instead create 'technostress' and 'quiet cracking' when mismanaged.

Yet the research also showed that the issue was never the technology itself, but the conditions around it. These included fragmented systems, unclear communication and purpose, and demands for constant connectivity.

Since then, the pace of change has accelerated once again. Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from experimentation to expectation, becoming embedded across everyday workflows. Yet while AI can often help resolve existing pressures within teams, it has introduced new ones, amplifying familiar workplace tensions in more complex ways.

This year's research, **The human cost of AI transformation**, explores how this technology is reshaping not just what people do, but how they experience work, and their sense of value, confidence in their expertise, and trust in the systems around them. The data highlights a clear paradox. AI is

widely adopted and often welcomed for its efficiency, yet many workers report rising fatigue, uncertainty, and a growing sense of disconnection from the meaning and ownership of their work.

At Adaptavist, we believe the tool or technology itself is rarely the problem, but its implementation, and the wider strategy around it, determines everything. The challenge now is ensuring organisations move beyond deployment to intentional design: aligning platforms, culture, and people in ways that reduce friction, strengthen autonomy, and unlock human potential.



# Introduction

This year's findings reveal a workplace defined by apparent paradoxes.

Despite unprecedented investment in AI technologies and rapid organisational adoption, a growing number of knowledge workers are expressing a sense of disconnection from the very systems designed to support them.

Rather than signalling smooth transformation, the data points to an emerging tension between technological progress and human experience, one where efficiency gains coexist with rising unease, and where innovation is often accompanied by a sense of loss.

## Methodology

The research surveyed 2,500 knowledge workers from the UK, US, Canada, Germany, and Spain in March 2026. It was conducted by [Attest](#).



At the heart of this contradiction is a form of **'pre-AI nostalgia.'** Far from rejecting technology outright, many workers are questioning whether the 'soul' of their work has been traded in for the sake of convenience and efficiency.



Alongside this sits the emergence of a **'verification tax':** a hidden productivity burden created by the need to check, correct, and validate AI-generated work. The findings show that rather than reducing workload, workers often believe that in many cases AI simply redistributes it.



In parallel, a new cultural dynamic is forming: **'human vs. machine'**, where employees increasingly feel their output, speed, and value are being measured against AI technology itself, leading to new pressures and expectations.



Taken together, these challenges are contributing to a potential **'white-collar exodus'**, in which **33% of knowledge workers are now considering changing industries to escape from the shadow of AI.**



## CHAPTER 1

## The rise of 'pre-AI nostalgia'

Over three years since generative AI tools first entered the mainstream workplace, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many to imagine what work looked like before.



However, a notable proportion of workers report a continued attachment to pre-AI ways of working. In fact, **almost two-thirds (65%) of knowledge workers say they regularly feel nostalgic about how work operated before the widespread adoption of AI.**

Interestingly, **Gen Z workers are the most likely to prefer the pre-AI world (42%)** compared to **Gen X (26%)**, challenging the assumption that digital-native employees are inherently more comfortable with AI-driven ways of working.

At the heart of this nostalgia is a perceived **'creative and ethical deficit.'** Workers are not rejecting the technology outright; they are reacting to the feeling that something human and meaningful is slipping away in the process of leveraging AI at work.



**KEVIN NANNEY**  
CPO, *Tempo Software*



**"42% of Gen Z tells us they prefer working life before AI.** These are people who have never known a professional world without the internet, yet they're the generation most likely to say they preferred work before AI came along. That's worth sitting with.

"It tells us that **the problem isn't capability or familiarity. It's meaning.** If the people who are most comfortable with technology still feel something is being lost, leaders need to ask what that something is—and whether their AI roll-outs are quietly stripping it out. The tools aren't the issue. How we're deploying them is."

## The research shows:

31%

would prefer to remove AI because it reduces human creativity

46%

are frustrated that tasks requiring years of expertise can now be done by almost anyone using AI

23%

feel their personal expertise is less valued since AI adoption increased

This creates a subtle but important shift in workplace identity. Expertise once accumulated over years can now appear bypassable, and work that once required deep domain knowledge is increasingly being compressed into prompt-based outputs.

The result is a **'comparison distortion'** between human effort and machine output. Employees are not only evaluating AI; they are evaluating themselves against it.



**MIKE POTTER**  
Co-Founder and CEO, *Rewind*



**"Nearly a quarter of workers feel their expertise is less valued since AI became widespread.** That's a real sentiment, but it's based on a misread of what's actually happening.

"AI is incredibly fast and increasingly capable—but it operates without judgment. It doesn't know what it doesn't know. The people who understand their domain, who can spot when an AI agent is confidently wrong, who know what 'good' looks like in their field—they're more critical now, not less. **The real risk isn't that AI replaces experts, it's that organisations don't give these experts the right tools and guardrails to direct AI safely, so everyone stays stuck in low gear out of caution.**"



## Summary

Business leaders should bear in mind that nostalgia does not mean regression. However, it is clear feedback that signals friction points around autonomy, craftsmanship, and identity.

Therefore, to succeed, AI strategies must support workers by explicitly preserving human ownership of work, while maximising human skills, capability, and domain expertise. By investing in AI specifically where it delivers the most value—particularly in reducing administrative burden and repetitive tasks—organisations can ensure AI augments rather than dilutes expert roles, avoiding the unintended stripping of meaning from specialist work.



## CHAPTER 2

## AI fatigue and the missing 'why?'

Despite widespread investment in tools and platforms—Gartner predicts that global AI spend will hit \$2.5 trillion in 2026—a significant proportion of employees remain unclear about the purpose and intent behind their use of AI technologies.

The findings show that **36% of workers often do not understand why they are expected to use AI in their role**, while an equal proportion (**36%**) **report AI fatigue, leading to reduced usage of tools altogether**. This suggests that adoption is not the same as engagement, nor does one guarantee the other.





Yet interestingly, this is not a rejection of AI. In fact, sentiment toward organisational AI strategies remains broadly positive:



This contradiction reveals an important truth: employees are not sceptical of AI itself, but they are sceptical of ambiguity around how it is implemented and communicated at work.

Importantly, **more than half (54%) of workers** say their concerns about AI are being heard by their employer, a majority signal of healthy organisational responsiveness. However, it still indicates a substantial number whose concerns are not being fully addressed.

Alongside this, a further structural shift is underway: **66% of workers say project and work management platforms are becoming more important** for organising and managing AI-enabled workflows, and **63% said project management platforms help them to get the most out of AI**. This reflects a growing need for businesses to connect outputs to visible systems of execution, coordination, and accountability.



**MONI HOUSER**

Head of AI GTM, *monday.com*



“When **67% of workers want their organisation to increase its use of AI**, the question is no longer whether to adopt it. It’s how to make it work at scale.

“Teams need a way to bring AI into their day-to-day workflows so it supports how they plan, collaborate, and execute. *monday.com* provides the foundation to **align people, processes, automation, and agents in one place**, turning growing demand for AI into measurable results.”

## Summary



**JOBIN KURUVILLA**

Field CTO, *Adaptavist*



“**Transparency is critical to truly drive AI engagement**; organisations must establish clear guardrails and maintain an open dialogue around AI use and employee choice where workers feel they are being listened to.

“Leveraging AI within platforms they have already invested in—such as Atlassian, Microsoft 365, GitLab, and *monday.com*—and applying System of Work principles to collaborate, knowledge share, and automate manual tasks can **help connect execution with strategy, ensuring teams see the purpose and impact of their work**—and where AI can help.”

## CHAPTER 3

# The cognitive costs of AI at work

One of the most underestimated consequences of widespread AI adoption is the emergence of a hidden productivity cost: the **'verification tax.'**

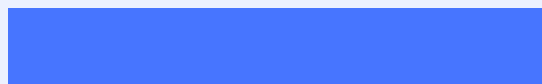
While AI is designed to reduce workload, poor-quality output is routinely creating a parallel layer of work—checking, correcting, and validating machine-generated content. And quite often, the verification tax means that AI is creating even more work and time pressures than it's alleviating.



**42%** of workers spend more time verifying AI output than they save using it



**52%** regularly correct AI-generated work from colleagues



**49%** say poor-quality AI output slows down projects



**55%** believe AI-generated content reduces overall team efficiency



**46%** say it makes their work feel more repetitive and less meaningful



**ANAND UNADKAT**  
Senior Solutions Architect  
*Atlassian*



"While 73% of workers acknowledge AI's efficiency, the fact that **42% spend more time verifying output** signals a 'verification tax' that leaders must eliminate.

"Ultimately, by **automating the mundane tasks that make work feel repetitive** for 46% of the staff in the research, organisations can refocus their specialists on high-value creativity, transforming AI from a source of fatigue into a powerful engine for meaningful human achievement."



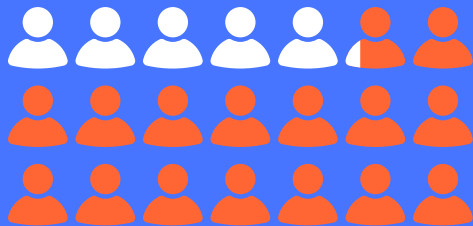
## 'Human vs. machine'

At the same time, a new cultural dynamic is emerging: 'human vs. machine'. **Half of workers (50%) feel their performance is now directly or indirectly compared to AI-generated output.** This can create perceived pressure to match machine speed and volume, even when quality, nuance, and judgment matter more.

We also see behavioural adaptation in keeping up with perceived AI-related performance pressure:

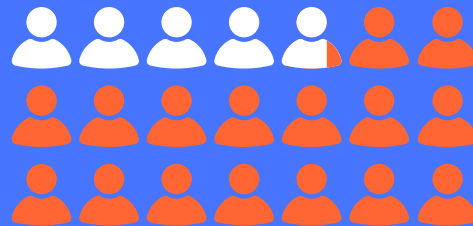
# 25%

are now using AI to meet workload demands



# 23%

use it simply to keep up with colleagues



# 26%

are experiencing rising pressure to be faster

# 25%

are experiencing rising pressure to be higher quality

# 24%

are experiencing rising pressure to be more efficient



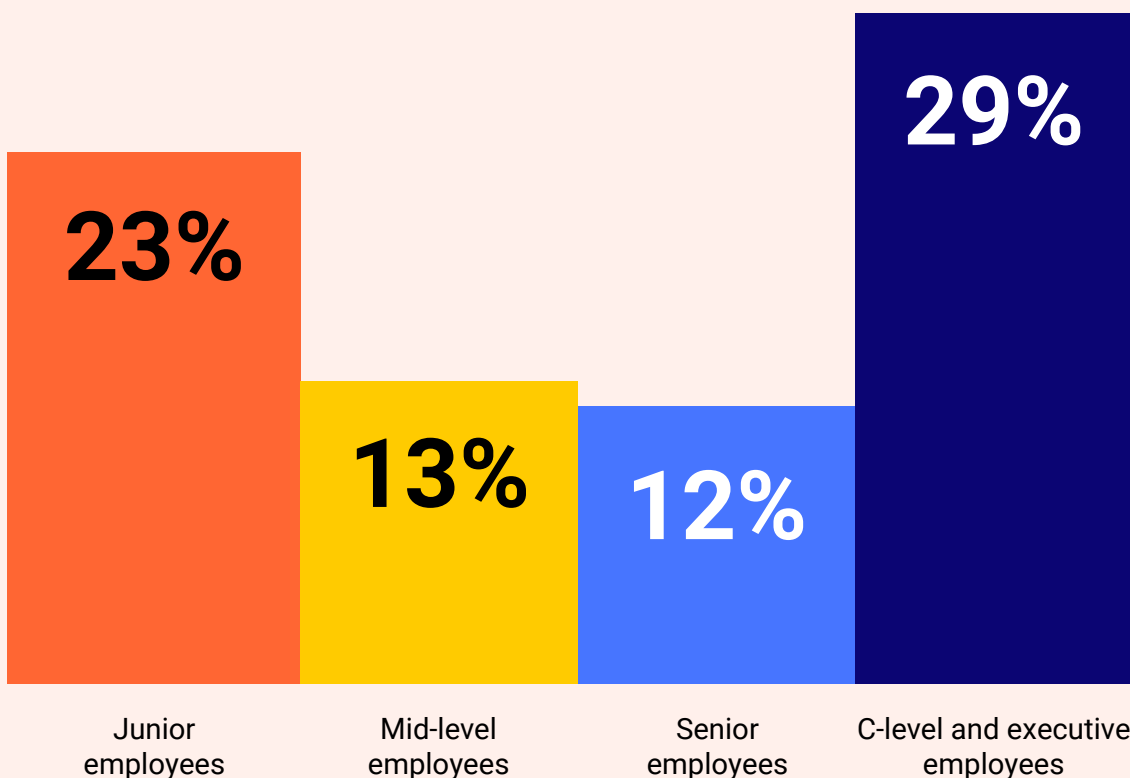


## Fear of obsolescence

Running beneath the day-to-day frustrations of verification and poor-quality output is something more fundamental: a growing anxiety about long-term relevance in the workplace. Our data shows that **more than half (54%) of knowledge workers say they are concerned that AI could reduce the need for their role within the next five years.**

What's particularly striking is where this concern is most acute. Senior leaders, those closest to strategic decision-making, are among the most uneasy.

I am concerned AI will reduce the need for my role in the next five years



This creates an unusual dynamic. Those expected to lead AI transformation are also among the most uncertain about its long-term implications, while those earlier in their careers are navigating an unstable landscape.

**LISA SCHAFFER**

Global Work  
Management  
Practice Lead  
*Adaptavist*



**“29% of C-suite leaders say they are ‘very’ concerned that AI will reduce the need for their role** within five years. The people expected to lead the transformation are also among the most uncertain about where it leads. That’s not a weakness, that’s honesty.

“And it’s also a starting point. When leaders are willing to sit with that uncertainty and ask the hard questions, they create space for their organisations to adapt thoughtfully, not just reactively. **The leaders who will thrive are the ones leaning into the conversation, not avoiding it.**”

## Summary

Taken together, these dynamics —**‘the verification tax’, ‘human vs. machine’, and ‘fear of obsolescence’**—point to a fundamental shift in how work is structured. AI is not always removing effort, but redistributing it, from execution to verification, from creation to comparison, and from certainty to ambiguity.

For leaders, this creates a new challenge: not just driving AI adoption, but managing the hidden operational and psychological costs that can come with it. Without clear guardrails, accountability, and alignment, the promise of AI efficiency risks being offset by a growing burden on the very people it is designed to support.

But it also creates an opportunity—by heeding this warning and leaning into the uncertainty, leaders can proactively work to ensure that their organisation’s AI strategy meets employee concerns at all levels, and is truly built around employee needs. This will help them to move from AI adoption to AI engagement, and fully realise the true potential of AI.

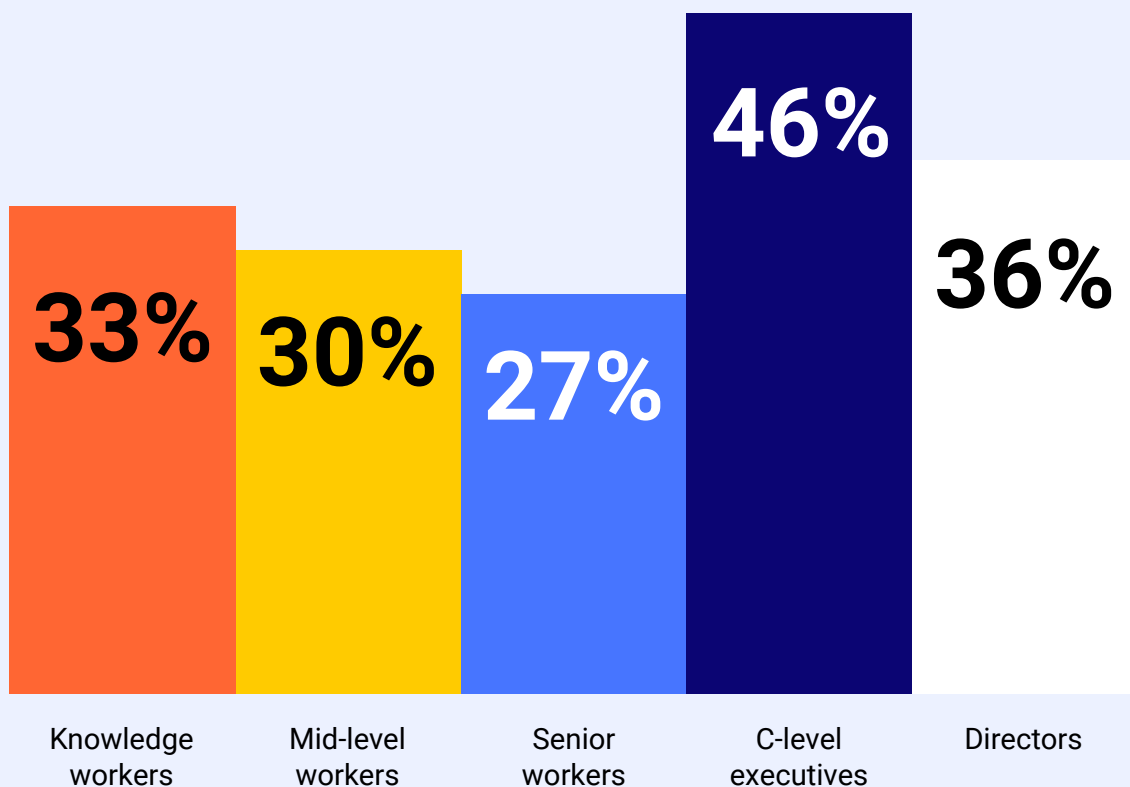
## CHAPTER 4

## The white-collar exodus

Driven by the fear of obsolescence, shifting cultural expectations around the technology, and the growing pull of 'pre-AI' ways of working outlined in previous chapters, a more structural risk is emerging: a potential exodus of talent from knowledge work in an attempt to step out of AI's shadow.

The data suggests this is far from theoretical. **One in three (33%) knowledge workers** say they are already considering changing industries due to AI. This rises to **46% among C-level executives** and **36% of directors**. **Mid-level and senior workers are most secure at 30% and 27%**, but still considering changing industries at notably high levels.

I am looking to move industries  
or change careers out of fear of AI



Retirement, too, is increasingly part of the conversation. **Over a third (34%) of workers** say AI has made them consider retiring earlier than planned. Once again, this sentiment is most pronounced at the top, with **47% of C-level executives admitting they are contemplating stepping away entirely.**

For some, the response is not just to leave a role, but to rethink the nature of work itself. Among those considering a career change, **25% are actively exploring professions perceived to be less exposed to AI**, such as skilled trades or manual roles, and **20% are aiming to make this move within the next two years.**



**VIC CHYNOWETH**

CEO

*Tempo Software*



“When you look at these numbers, the instinct is to talk about reskilling programs and training budgets. **That’s the right conversation, but it’s happening too late.** If workers are already planning to retrain on their own or heading for the door—that is the sign AI implementation is failing.

“People don’t wait to be saved at work—they will start making their own calls, and leaders need to get ahead of this. Not with a town hall, but a **program of genuine one-on-ones** about what people see for themselves in the next two years. The workers who stay and thrive through this shift will be the ones that felt their company was honest with them early. The ones that leave quietly will be the ones who weren’t.”



## The 'adaptation' countertrend

However, leaving the fold is only one side of the story.

Alongside this potential exodus sits an equally powerful trend: adaptation. The results show that a huge **74% of workers are actively learning new skills** to stay relevant in their field, rising to **85% among C-level leaders**. This signals a clear recognition that while roles may change, relevance can indeed be maintained, provided individuals are equipped to evolve alongside the technology.

This creates a dual reality within the workforce. Some are stepping away, seeking certainty outside of AI's reach. Others are leaning in, investing in their future within it. The deciding factor between the two is increasingly not the technology itself, but the level of support, clarity, and opportunity provided by employers.



**ELI MITCHELL**

Senior Director  
of Partnerships  
*Rewind*



“The fact that **three-quarters of workers are actively reskilling** tells me the motivation is already there: people want to work with AI, not run from it. But when 39% say the pace of change feels impossible to keep up with, that’s a signal that **organisations are deploying AI tools faster than they’re building the support systems around them**.

“The technology partners and platform ecosystems that win here will be the ones that make AI adoption feel **safe and reversible**, giving teams the confidence to experiment without worrying that one wrong move could cause irreversible damage across their connected tools. When people know they have a safety net, the anxiety drops and the adoption accelerates.”

## Summary



**NEAL RILEY**  
AI Innovation Lead  
*The Adaptavist Group*



“The organisations that succeed in the age of AI and capitalise on the opportunities it presents will be those that prioritise helping teams actively understand how AI enhances, rather than eliminates human roles, and ensuring the technology they use leverages AI where it’s most needed to support them in their daily work.

“Our research highlights, for example, that workers really feel the benefit when AI is properly integrated into project management software, giving business leaders a clear indicator as to where the positives of AI are most keenly felt by those executing work.

“But of course, technology is only one part of the puzzle. Investing in reskilling and upskilling initiatives that maximise domain-specific expertise and reduce performance anxiety is key. And the data shows that the intent to learn is certainly there—but it is up to business leaders to create cultures which champion learning and development to support employees seeking to future-proof their skills.

“Our earlier research already proved that “more training, technical support, and training resources” means better results and happier teams, and these factors should remain a top investment priority for employers as AI continues to reshape how work is delivered.

“This isn’t a ‘one-and-done’ effort, but an ongoing, long-term strategic focus, where two-way dialogue becomes essential to informing AI strategy, while supporting employees one-on-one with tool-based training to help them leverage functionality like Atlassian Rovo, easing the strain of manual work where teams need it the most.”

# Conclusion

This research makes one thing clear: AI is not simply transforming work, it is reshaping how work is experienced.

Across every chapter, a consistent paradox emerges. Workers are certainly embracing AI, yet the same technologies designed to increase productivity and efficiency are also introducing new layers of effort, uncertainty, and psychological strain. From the rise of **'pre-AI nostalgia'**, where workers reflect on how work felt before AI became embedded in their daily routines; in the emergence of a hidden **'verification tax'**, where time is increasingly spent checking and correcting machine-generated output; and in growing **'human vs machine'** comparisons, where employees feel their work is being measured against the speed and volume of AI systems.

Together, these pressures are contributing to a broader structural risk: a potential **white-collar exodus**, as workers reassess the value, stability, and future relevance of knowledge work itself.

Yet the data also shows clear intent by the workforce to upskill and evolve, and to leverage AI in

ways that uphold their experience and domain expertise, pointing to a positive path forward.

Where AI is implemented with clarity, support, and strong alignment between people and systems, it becomes an enabler rather than a source of friction. The difference is not technological capability, but organisational intent.

Ultimately, the future of AI in the workplace will be defined not by adoption rates, but by whether organisations can design environments where people remain confident, capable, and in control of their work.





## About Adaptavist and The Adaptavist Group

At Adaptavist, we help organisations remove friction, unlock value, and achieve long-term, exponential growth.

Founded in 2005, we're a global provider of transformative solutions and a trusted partner to Atlassian, monday.com, AWS, GitLab, and many more. Our expert consultancy aligns strategy, platforms, and people with powerful tailored solutions that redefine how work is delivered and achieve sustained business outcomes.

Experts in cloud, service management, work management, DevOps, agile, and AI, we are the pioneer brand of The Adaptavist Group, a family of companies whose team spans over 1,000 employees, with a 22,000+ customer base representing more than half the Fortune 500. We combine the best talent, technology, and processes to make it easier for our customers to excel—today and tomorrow.

Contact us: [hello@adaptavist.com](mailto:hello@adaptavist.com)

