

The AI High: Feeling optimistic but overwhelmed

How UK workers really feel about
the advancement of AI in the workplace

**A survey report from
Henley Business School**

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed how we interact and communicate to become part of our daily lives – whether we realise it or not. From our reliance on virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa, through to the recommended content we consume on Netflix and Spotify. AI in these scenarios is deemed OK.

But when it comes to the role of AI in our working lives, the narrative can be very different. Whether it's a fear of robots taking our jobs or the impact of bias on AI generated content, it's no surprise that many UK workers remain cautious and unsure of how AI can work in harmony with its human counterparts.

With the UK Government ramping up AI adoption following the launch of its AI Opportunities Action Plan in January 2025, we wanted to understand how workers really feel about AI in the workplace today, as well as their hopes for the future. Does optimism outweigh concern? What support do they need to accept AI? Can they see a harmonious and fruitful future?

To find out, we surveyed over 4,000 full-time workers from across the UK, working in a variety of industries, about their attitudes and aspirations towards AI. This report outlines the key survey findings, analysis and advice from our experts to support individuals and businesses successfully navigate an evolving AI landscape.

Foreword

AI has the potential to impact every employee and industry in some way – whether from a functional or more fundamental perspective.

Through our survey we have been able to take a snapshot of current feelings and fears of those impacted by the rise of AI. Because AI isn't really about technology. It's about people. Strategies shouldn't start with AI but with humans, assessing the value of work and what needs to be achieved.

What is the priority? What do we need to improve and how can we do it? Without a clear strategy or guidance, AI adoption could do more harm than good.

Business leaders need to make sure people understand the strategy behind the introduction of AI and have the right support in place. This will help reduce fear of the unknown and unlock the true potential, ensuring AI augments rather than overtakes our working lives.



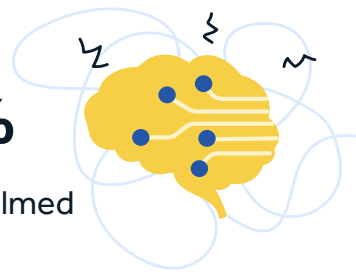
Professor James Walker, Director, World of Work Institute,
Henley Business School



56%
feel
optimistic
about AI



61%
also feel
overwhelmed



but

High
Medium
Low

Publishing, HR, IT

Sales, Transport,
Science

Retail, Teaching,
Law, Charity,
Construction

63%
of full-time workers
now use AI at work

Emotional sentiment

Cautious

Curious

Excited

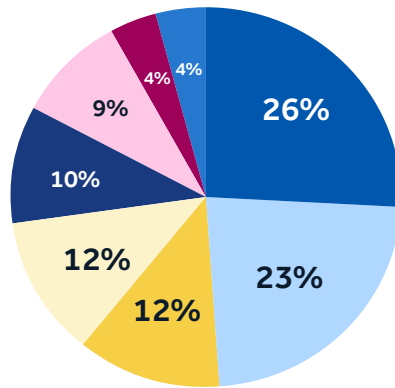
Confident

Fearful

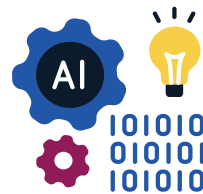
Happy

Head in the sand

Other



49%
report no AI
guidelines at work



60%
say they'd embrace
AI more with better
training



Frustrations

It can make mistakes

It needs reliable data
to work well

It might take away jobs

Nearly two-thirds
61%
do not fear losing
their jobs to AI

Over one-third
36%
are concerned about
job loss due to AI



57%
expect to rely
on AI in the
next 5 years

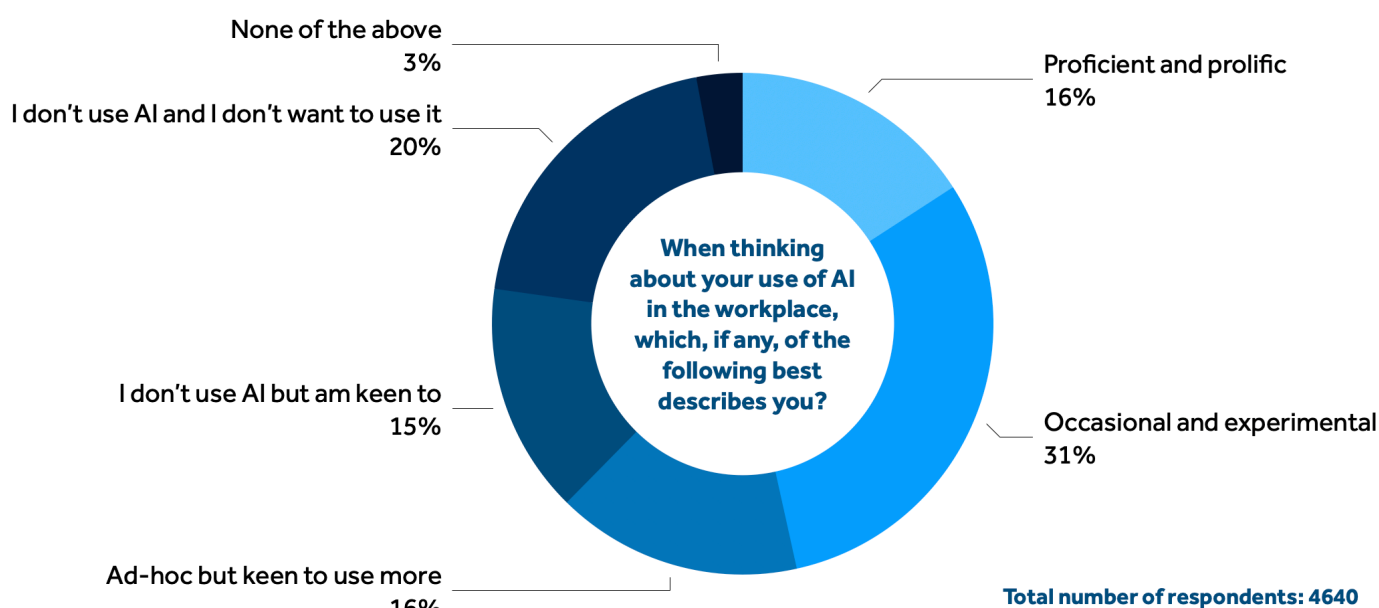
37%
believe AI will
boost their
productivity



An AI pulse check

AI usage and acceptance is becoming more commonplace across all business sectors in the UK, with two-thirds (63%) of workers admitting to using it in some way – whether ad hoc or every day.

According to our survey, the most proficient and prolific users are in the fields of information research and analysis (44%), IT (40%), publishing and journalism (37%), and recruitment and HR (33%). In contrast, one in five (20%) respondents across all sectors said they did not want to use AI. This rose to 36% in teaching and retail professions.



Despite these differing views between sectors, more than half (56%) of full-time workers are optimistic about the benefits of AI at work. The positivity around the value of AI rises among younger respondents, with 64% of Generation Z and 63% of Millennials seeing it as beneficial. 54% also agree that it is valuable to their working day but don't feel they are using it to its full potential. This was highest among workers in information research and analysis (78%), IT (77%), and marketing, advertising and HR (76%) – well above the base finding.



"People have become used to the idea that AI is here to stay and are looking at ways in which they can use it to their advantage; fear of the unknown seems to have receded which is contributing to the more positive outlook."

**Professor Keiichi Nakata, Director of AI & Automation
World of Work Institute**



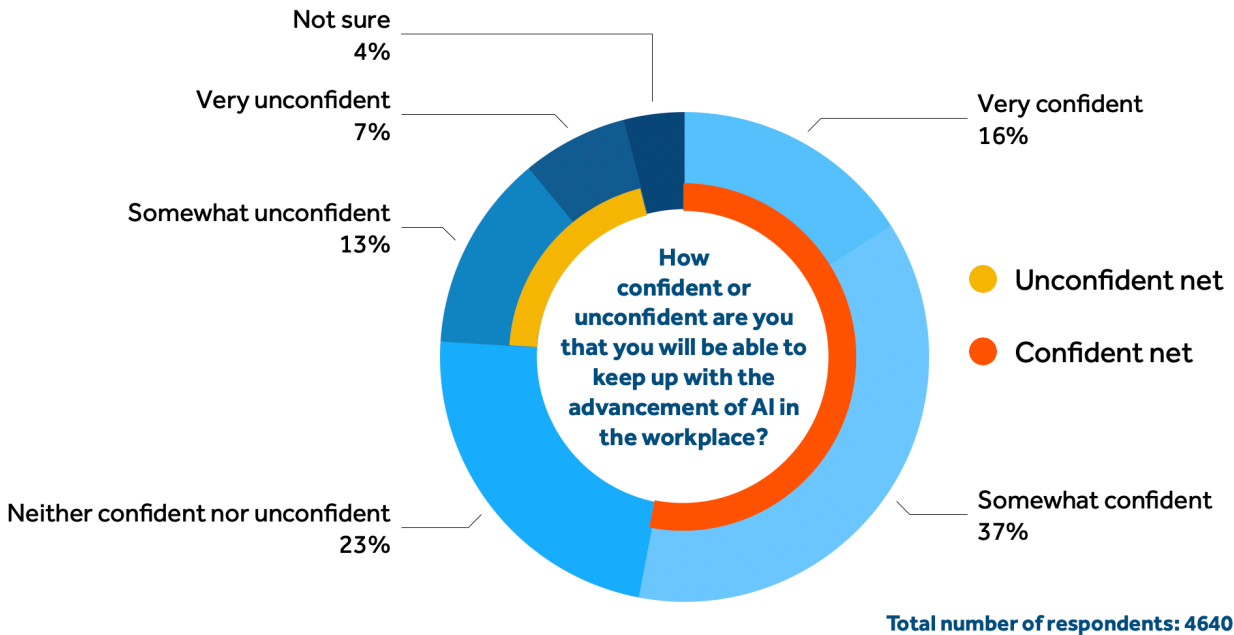
On average, workers currently use AI tools for 3.5 hours per week – with a fifth (19%) admitting to spending 6 or more hours a week using it to help with tasks. The most common uses include assisting with research (35%), data analysis (33%) and content creation (32%). Completing boring tasks (33%) was the main thing people like about using AI in the workplace.

However, despite the optimism and potential surrounding AI, barriers to take-up still remain – largely due to the speed of change. Indeed, just under two-thirds (61%) of workers find it overwhelming to keep up with the rapid pace of AI technology advancements. This was a view largely shared across the ages and sectors we surveyed. The sheer number of tools available can also be overwhelming, making it difficult to know just where to start (24%) or which one to use (22%).

One in five (20%) workers also cited a lack of confidence in staying up to speed with the advancement of AI in the workplace, with a third in teaching and education (33%), and the charity and voluntary sector (33%) believing they won't be able to keep pace.



"Leaders must be aware of the differing feelings within the workforce and provide the right support through appropriate messages. There is no going back now – it's about how we use AI, how we use judgement, discernment and critical thinking to make the most of it."
**Professor Patricia Riddell, Professor of Applied Neuroscience
University of Reading**



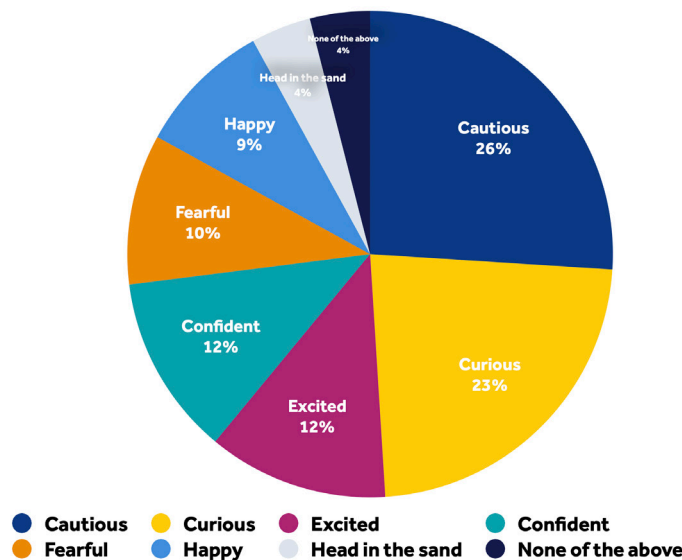
"It is hugely encouraging to see the high levels of optimism and perceived potential that workers across all industries attribute to AI. But this is overshadowed by a feeling of being overwhelmed by the evolution and options. A resulting lack of confidence can leave many unsure of just how to effectively unleash the full potential of AI."
**Professor James Walker, Director
World of Work Institute**



Feelings, fears and frustrations

The current feeling among the UK workforce we surveyed about AI can be summed up as one of 'cautious curiosity'. When asked what emotion best describes their attitude towards AI, 26% opted for 'cautious' with 23% going for 'curious', showing the mixed emotions that AI evokes. With only 4% having their 'heads in the sand' this suggests there is a feeling that AI is not something we can easily ignore.

Which, if any, of the following best describes how you feel about AI?



Confidence in AI rises to over a quarter (28%) of those surveyed in information research and analysis, and one in five (20%) of HR and recruitment professionals. Those in education are the most cautious, with over a third (36%) aligning themselves with this feeling.

When it comes to fears and frustrations associated with AI, the survey suggests that job losses are not the overriding issue. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of workers are not worried that their job will be replaced by AI. This rises to around three-quarters of respondents in teaching (75%), property and construction (73%) and social care (73%). It's also not the top frustration for AI users – with 33% frustrated that AI makes mistakes and 30% saying that it needs reliable data in order to work well. 19% are frustrated with the biased nature of AI and 22% worry that it invades privacy.

For those workers that are fearful of AI replacing their jobs (36%), 31% are learning new skills to avoid this happening. One in five (19%) say they are switching to work in a different field.

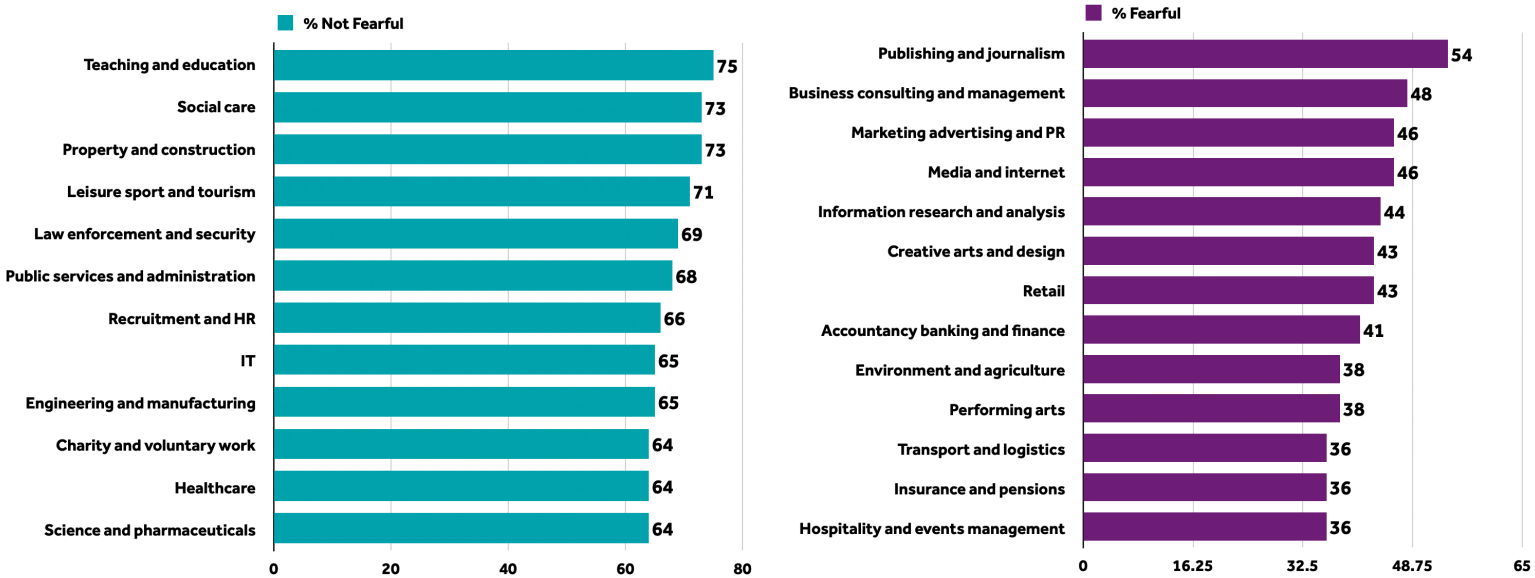


"The use of AI is becoming normalised and socially accepted, which is enhancing adoption. It is illuminating to see that the fear of job losses is less of a concern which suggests that people are more open to embracing AI today and working with it rather than in fear of it. As we would expect roles where the 'human' element plays a crucial part of interactions – including teaching and social care – are less fearful of AI negatively impacting their work. But we also see typically data- and admin-heavy roles, where AI could be utilised to automate operational-level tasks – such as HR, IT and public services – among the least fearful sectors."

Professor Keiichi Nakata, Director of AI & Automation
World of Work Institute



How fearful, if at all, are you that your job will be replaced by AI?



Workers in the publishing and journalism (54%), business, consulting and management (48%) and marketing, advertising and PR (46%) are the most fearful that AI could replace their role. Interestingly, this is at odds with predictions around their increased reliance on AI in their daily work in the next five years (rather than as a replacement): 75% of those in marketing, advertising and PR respondents and 71% of those in publishing and journalism believed they would become more reliant on AI, not replaced by it.

Of all workers surveyed, 57% believe they will rely more on AI in the next five years, with the top three benefits for their industry cited as efficiency and productivity (37%), data analysis and insights (35%) and cost savings (34%).

Seven in ten are more comfortable to tell people that they use AI tools in their work, than compared to 12 months ago. Around three-quarters of those who use AI in their work are transparent with colleagues (76%) and their boss (74%), with 64% open with clients regarding AI use.



"This acknowledgement that AI is playing a more integral role in our working lives is demonstrated in the openness that people have in their use of AI. It indicates that workers are taking ownership of AI rather than letting it take over."

**Professor Keiichi Nakata, Director of AI & Automation
World of Work Institute**



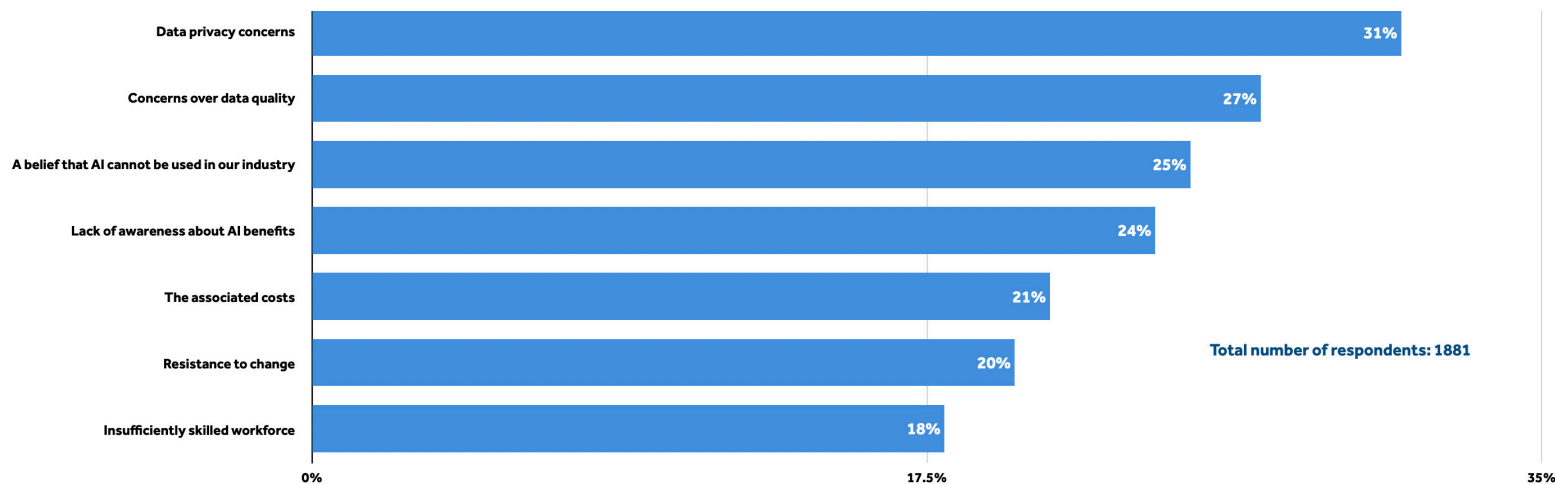
Barriers and expectations

When we asked people about how much their organisation had embraced AI and the level of support they receive to enable them to use it effectively, the responses paint a mixed picture.

53% of workers believe their organisation is embracing AI, with 41% disagreeing. For those in property and construction, 61% do not believe their company is embracing AI, but 91% of those in IT and 77% of those in publishing and journalism agree that they are.

When asked why they think their organisation is not embracing AI, data privacy (31%), concerns over data quality (27%) and a lack of awareness about the benefits (24%) were some of the top reasons. 18% also cited an insufficiently skilled workforce as a key barrier to take-up.

Which, if any, of the following are reasons you think your organisation isn't embracing AI?



In terms of guidelines and support for AI use and upskilling, about a quarter (24%) of respondents stated that a lack of training from their workplace makes it hard to use AI. In fact, our survey uncovered that almost half 49% of workers said that their employer had no guidelines for AI usage, and one fifth (19%) didn't know.

When asked how inclined they would be to use or use AI more in the workplace if provided with training, the majority (60%) said they would be more inclined. This rises to 77% of HR and recruitment professionals and 63% of those in environment and agriculture. In-house training programmes (41%) were the most desired form of support, followed by courses (39%), hands-on projects (32%), and workshops by an external company (29%).



"There is an expectation that more can be done with AI, and people are looking for ways that can be achieved through guidance, training and support. From a technology acceptance perspective, providing positive facilitating conditions such as training, support and guidelines could further enhance adoption."

**Professor Keiichi Nakata, Director of AI & Automation
World of Work Institute**



Bias and beyond

With bias often considered as one of the biggest hurdles to overcome in terms of fair representation and usage of AI, we asked respondents who they felt should be responsible for making AI more equitable. The results were far from conclusive but raise an interesting question around where the buck should stop. 38% say both businesses and government should be responsible. 13% think just government. 19% say responsibility lies with businesses using AI and 16% with businesses that produce AI tools. 14% were unsure what the answer should be.

When asked if they felt AI could make the workplace more equitable, people responded positively with 42% believing it could, compared to only 10% who felt it could be detrimental. This could indicate that AI has the potential to reduce unfairness and biases that currently exist in the workplace. Automating routine checks (46%), ensuring compliance with ethical standards (38%), providing anonymous reporting tools (37%), and reducing hiring biases (36%) were seen as the top ways in which it could do this.

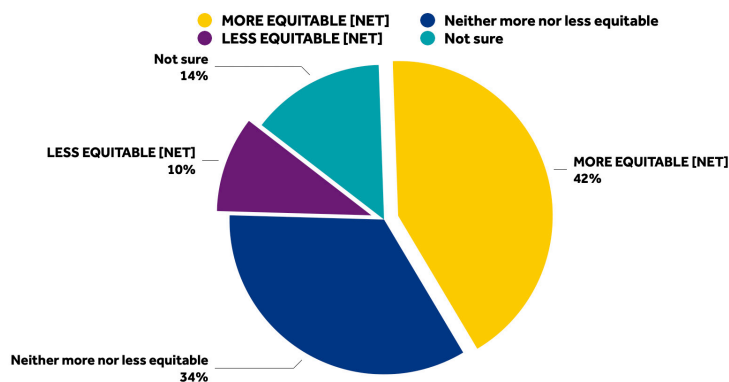
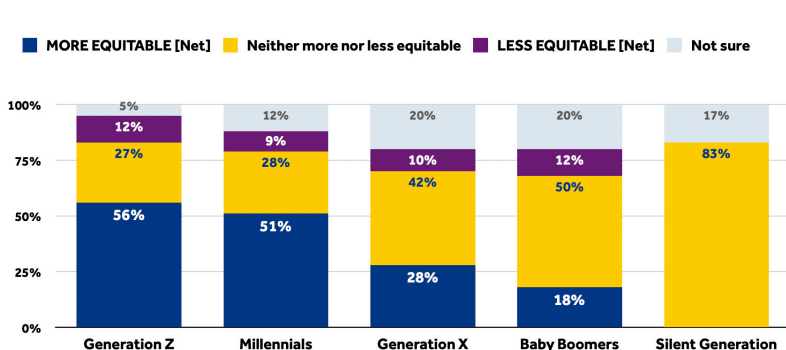


"Despite the positive outlook, when we looked at the difference between groups, this showed some interesting and divergent perspectives. Younger employees (Millennials and Generation Z) were more likely to agree that AI would make the workplace more equitable compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers. Likewise, men were more positive about the impact on equity than women (47% compared to 39% respectively). This potentially links to previous research which suggests older workers and women feel less security in the workplace and that AI may be perceived as impacting on some workers more than others."

Dr Melissa Carr, Director of EDI

World of Work Institute

Do you think AI could make your workplace more or less equitable? (E.g. more fair and impartial)



Efficiency and productivity gains are also considered among the main benefits of AI (and echoed by the findings of our survey). We were keen to dig deeper into future potential and what impact it could have on making a work-time reduction possible and the four-day week a reality.

We asked workers how helpful they felt AI could be in making a work-time reduction possible in their industry. The results were overwhelmingly supportive of using AI to enable a work-time reduction by cutting down admin work (72%), automating routine, manual tasks (69%), and making workflow better (66%).



"These findings support the growing narrative of AI as a powerful tool for handling time-consuming, repetitive tasks, allowing employees to focus on more meaningful, strategic work. Interpersonal experiences in the workplace may also benefit from the use of AI, as 60% noted improvements in customer service, indicating that AI may enhance the quality and responsiveness of client-facing roles, and 46% believe it enhances teamwork, potentially through better coordination, communication tools, or intelligent task delegation."

Dr Rita Fontinha, Director of Flexible Work
World of Work Institute

When asked directly about the potential for AI to contribute to a four-day working week, 57% of respondents agreed it could become a reality with increased AI integration. This optimism rises significantly among those in recruitment and HR, with 73% expressing confidence in AI's potential to enable this shift — possibly reflecting their vantage point in observing workforce dynamics and organisational change. Over three-quarters of those in IT also agreed (78%) closely followed by information research and analysis (75%), marketing, advertising and PR (73%), and publishing and journalism (73%).



"These findings offer valuable guidance for business leaders exploring AI as a tool for workplace effectiveness. The strong consensus around AI's potential to reduce administrative burdens, streamline workflows, and enhance both learning and collaboration suggests that thoughtful AI adoption can lead not only to greater efficiency but also to more flexible work arrangements. As over half of professionals believe AI could help make a four-day working week a reality, leaders have a timely opportunity to rethink traditional work models, improve employee wellbeing, and strengthen their organisation's competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent."

Dr Rita Fontinha, Director of Flexible Work
World of Work Institute



Summary and recommendations

It is clear that AI usage in the workplace is a divisive topic. While our survey provides a strong steer towards workers hopes and expectations of AI now and in the future, it also shows a lack of clarity and confidence among the workforce when it comes to keeping up and taking full advantage. Whilst AI is not always the answer, the curiosity and willingness to adopt it is there, in the right situation and industry setting.

Today's workers, in the main, are open and ready to use AI but need support from their organisation to enable them to unlock the benefits. AI will impact every business, whether we like it or not. Putting clear guidelines and guardrails in place to ensure the ethical and efficient use of AI will mean that AI supports workers rather than sabotages roles which in turn will create opportunities not opposition.

Henley Business School works with businesses and individuals across a range of industries to give them the skills needed to manage and adapt to the evolving world of work and AI landscape.

From adopting and using AI, through to ethical considerations and governance frameworks – we understand the pressure points for today's organisations and work with them to provide actionable and tailored solutions.

Survey methodology

The World of Work Institute at Henley Business School commissioned market research experts, OnePoll, to survey 4,640 full-time workers (32% in junior roles and 68% at manager level) aged 18+ from across the UK, about their personal use of AI tools and attitudes towards AI in the workplace.

Responses were collected via an online survey between 4th and 16th April 2025. Workers across 29 different industries (160 in each) were surveyed, including: business consulting and management; charity and voluntary work; environment and agriculture; law enforcement and security; and marketing, advertising and PR.

For clarification, the report refers to the following generational breakdowns: Generation Z - respondents born after 1996 ; Millennials - respondents born between 1981 - 1996 ; Generation X - respondents born between 1965 - 1980 ; Baby Boomers - respondents born between 1946 - 1964 ; Silent Generation - respondents born between 1928 and 1945.

Unless otherwise stated, for the purposes of this report, the term 'workers' refers to both junior and manager level employees across all generations. Due to the split of respondents this survey is an indication of feeling across the UK and not nationality representative.

About Henley Business School

Henley is a triple-accredited business school and part of the University of Reading. With campuses, offices and partnerships around the world and over 100,000 alumni from 160 countries, we are a truly international institution. As a trusted partner, we help organisations tackle complex challenges and develop in-house capability through insights, development programmes, coaching and consultancy. Our courses are aimed at students and professionals at every career stage – from undergraduate and postgraduate to PhD, MBA, DBA and executive education.

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