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AI, health and the future of work

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping the workplace, with profound implications for productivity, job quality and workplace wellbeing. At his recent Mansion House speech, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan warned that AI could become a "weapon of mass destruction for jobs", a stark reminder of the technology's capacity to remove roles at scale if its adoption is unmanaged or poorly governed.

This warning framed the discussion not as a vague and distant risk, but as an urgent, present-day challenge for employers and policymakers alike. Participants emphasised that the risks associated with AI extend beyond job displacement alone. Even where roles are retained, poorly implemented AI can intensify workloads, undermine autonomy, eroding trust and aggravating mental health.

In spite of its potential to revolutionise the workplace, AI should be viewed as a tool for augmentation rather than substitution. When integrated judiciously in systems and patterns of work in consultation with workers, AI has the potential to enhance individual and organisational productivity. The effect is to support creative and knowledge-intensive work, and improve public services – notably healthcare – while preserving the central role of human judgement, empathy and accountability.

This roundtable brought together policymakers, employers, technology experts and wellbeing practitioners to examine how these risks can be mitigated and how the considerable opportunities of AI adoption can be realised through effective governance, workforce engagement and a clear focus on long-term, inclusive growth.

Key takeaways

AI as a tool for augmentation and human enhancement

- AI was consistently framed as a tool to "augment, rather than replace, human support," particularly in complex or high-risk wellbeing and health contexts.
- It is most effective when applied to routine and administrative aspects of work, enabling people to focus on judgement, care, creativity and relational tasks that require human presence.
- The technology has the potential to rebalance how time is spent at work, including reducing the dominance of emails, meetings and low-value digital tasks that currently consume a large proportion of the working day.
- AI was seen as most effective when handling routine tasks such as triage, pattern recognition and administration, helping to "optimise the face-to-face human contact" that remains essential in care and people-centred roles – Microsoft found that digital communication consumes around an 60% of the working day, a Forbes study found a direct link with burnout.
- "The reality of the technology maturity cycle at the moment is such that it's much less automation, and it's much more about augmentation right now."

Trust and transparency are preconditions for success

- "AI has a huge trustworthiness problem, politically and in society". Effective AI adoption depends on organisational culture, particularly trust, transparency, engagement and psychological safety. Adoption of the technology in a vacuum is ill-advised.
- It tends to amplify existing cultures. Where trust is low, anxiety, resistance and disengagement increase rather than wellbeing or productivity. Research from Stanford found that the vast majority of corporate AI rollouts fail. Successful cases were driven by employee engagement and organisational conditions rather than the technology itself.
- "The evidence is increasingly clear that wellbeing is not an add-on to AI adoption, it is a precondition for success". Technology cannot compensate for excessive workloads, poor management or unhealthy organisational cultures.
- "Having space for cross-functional, open discussion about task-level augmentation improves adoption"

Real-world impacts on health and frontline services

- AI is already being applied in healthcare and frontline services to reduce administrative burden, freeing professional time for clinical judgement.
- AI can support earlier intervention and more consistent access to services where workforce capacity is constrained.
- While AI can help address practical barriers such as language, its use must reinforce dignity, empathy and relational care.

- Participants warned against going a “step too far” where technology might “remove that human touch,” particularly in elderly and social care.

Decision-making

- Accountability must remain with people, not systems, particularly in the case of “life-critical” tasks.
- Over-reliance on AI could lead to “cognitive laziness” where professional judgement is weakened rather than supported – “we take our brain out of the loop, and just publish it”.
- AI was framed as a tool for surfacing insights, not making decisions, with strong agreement that automated outputs must be subject to human challenge and oversight.
- Capability-building is essential. Organisations should “reward those people” who engage with and develop these complex skills.
- Avoid weakening human oversight by maintaining the ability to question, verify and override automated outputs.

Issues raised

Skills erosion and the emerging “junior gap”

AI poses significant implications for early-career pathways. Entry-level roles – the training ground for future professionals – are particularly vulnerable to automation, leading to skills erosion. Future workers are left without the foundational experience required to supervise, challenge or direct tasks, even if some of them are assisted by AI. Unmanaged displacement could result in social and economic backlash if large groups see work removed without clear transition routes. There’s also a growing capability gap among line managers, who are often expected to interpret AI-driven insights without adequate training. Without sustained investment in skills and development, AI risks being misunderstood, misapplied or actively resisted.

Regulation and protection vs. innovation and growth

The pace of AI development is outstripping existing regulatory and governance frameworks. AI represents a major opportunity to address the UK’s productivity challenge and improve public services, particularly healthcare, but only if adoption supports long-term investment rather than short-term cost reduction. “We need speed, but we also need principles.” UK corporate governance favours profit and shareholder value over workforce wellbeing and development. This points to the need for guardrails around accountability, transparency and worker buy-in, while retaining flexibility to allow the technology and its application to evolve in ways that benefit the wider economy. Resources like the TUC generative AI policy toolkit will be indispensable.

Incentive misalignment, value extraction and dehumanisation

In sectors where augmentation is limited, there's a powerful pull towards substitution. Without intervention, the likely outcome is to replace or remove roles rather than transition or reskill workers – "extracting value" from workers after they have helped build up "all the data and expertise being used to replace them". Without mechanisms for gain-sharing or reinvestment, productivity gains risk being captured narrowly while workers absorb the disruption. This misalignment also suppresses meaningful workforce engagement.

Evidence from current research into AI uptake shows that fear of redundancy and job loss is paralysing open discussion about how AI is actually changing work at task level. Where AI is imposed from above, workers are treated as replaceable inputs rather than participants, undermining trust, autonomy and psychological safety. In practice, reported efficiency gains are often delivered through job loss rather than improved work design, reinforcing dehumanisation and accelerating skills erosion, particularly for junior workers.

Recommendations

- Develop regulatory frameworks that ensure AI decisions are verifiable, challengeable and explainable, particularly regarding hiring, firing, and algorithmic work assignment.
- Mandate that AI implementation includes consultation with workers and trade unions to ensure democratized access and responsible use.
- Create tax structures that incentivise businesses to reinvest AI-driven productivity gains into wages, expansion, or innovation and employee reskilling.
- Strengthen guidance and enforcement to ensure that AI surveillance tech is not used to undermine trust or monitor private information unrelated to work performance.
- Provide practical framework structures and guidance specifically for SMEs to help them compete and adopt AI without the burden of "over regulating" their growth.
- Develop an overarching idea and strategy for AI across government departments to prevent working in silos and ensure technology benefits the wider justice system, DWP, and NHS collectively.
- Actively identify, promote and share best practice in responsible AI adoption, including through practical employer guidance such as the Policy Liaison Group for Workplace Wellbeing's Duty of Care Guidelines, to support consistent, high-quality implementation across sectors.

Links

- CIPD, CIPD Good work index, Chapter 6
- UK Government, AI skills for the UK workforce
- People Management, Workplace health in the AI era
- Health & Wellbeing at Work, AI in the workplace: Balancing innovation and employee wellbeing
- Linklaters, What might AI regulation in the UK workplace look like?
- Microsoft, Productivity at work – we communicate more than we create during the workday
- Forbes, The state of workplace communication
- Stanford University, How culture shapes what people want from AI
- TUC generative AI policy toolkit

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.

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