WHITE PAPER · HIRING STRATEGY

The shape of the future workforce: people and AI agents

What 2026 evidence shows about AI in the workforce: adoption, agents, productivity, jobs, entry-level hiring and skills, and how to plan your next team.

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IN SHORT

AI use is spreading quickly, but the measured evidence so far shows limited use of AI agents, small effects on economy-wide productivity and little change in total headcount at most firms using AI. There are real signs of pressure on some early-career roles, though sources disagree on how much AI explains. Plan from the work in your own business, and revisit the plan often.

- In the UK government's 2026 survey, 32% of businesses with five or more employees used AI, and 2% used or piloted AI agents.
- Most AI-using firms in official US data reported no AI-driven change in employment.
- People report large personal productivity gains. Measured and economy-wide effects are much smaller or unclear.
- Evidence on entry-level hiring is the most important to watch, and it is contested.
- Plan work, skills and routes into your company, not just job titles.

Claims about the future workforce travel faster than the evidence for them. This paper brings together what official statisticians, central bank staff, academic researchers, consultancies and platform companies had published by late November 2026, and keeps

apart three things that are often blurred: what has been **measured**, what people **report** and what they **expect**.

How we read the evidence

This is a synthesis of published research, not new data from Ryzon. For each figure we say who was studied and what kind of evidence it is.

Type	What it can tell you	Where to be careful
Measured	What happened in payroll, accounts, adverts or a trial	Often shows association, not cause
Reported in surveys	What people say they do or have seen	Memory, optimism and definitions
Expected	What people think will happen	Intentions often differ from outcomes
Modelled	What could happen under assumptions	Not a prediction of what will

One limit matters: this review does **not include** World Economic Forum or OECD publications. Several sources are published by companies that sell AI or recruitment products, and we say where that applies.

1. How many organisations use AI?

The answer depends on who is counted.

Source	Who	Result	Period
UK government (DSIT)	UK businesses with 5 or more employees	32% used AI, up from 16% in 2025[1]	January to April 2026
Office for National Statistics	UK businesses	30% used at least one AI technology[2]	September 2026
US Census Bureau	US employer businesses	Between 17% and 20%[3]	December 2025 to May 2026
McKinsey global survey	Its respondents' organisations	Nearly nine in ten reported regular use in at least one function[4]	May to June 2026

These are different surveys, samples and questions. Do not rank countries by comparing them.

Using AI is also not the same as using it deeply. The Office for National Statistics found that use among UK businesses with ten or more employees had risen from about 12% to about 35% since late 2023, while only 10% reported using AI extensively.[5] In US Census data, 57% of firms using AI used it in three or fewer business functions.[6]

2. What about AI agents?

AI agents, which can carry out multi-step tasks with some independence, get most of the attention. Measured use is still limited across businesses as a whole.

- In the UK government's survey, **2%** of businesses with five or more employees were using agentic AI, including pilots, and 91% were not using it and had no plans to. Among businesses already using AI, 7% used agentic AI. The report notes that awareness of the term was limited.[1]
- In McKinsey's survey, the share scaling agents in at least one function rose from 27% to **40%** among respondents at organisations with revenue of $1 billion or more. For smaller organisations it was 22%, and flat.[4] "Smaller" here still includes very large businesses.
- Microsoft reports that active agents in its Microsoft 365 products grew 15 times in a year.[7] A growth multiple does not show what share of companies use agents, and it is vendor data.

Our reading: agent use is growing quickly in some places from a low base. A scale-up can learn a great deal from a few well-chosen uses. There is little reason to assume everyone else has already finished.

3. Does AI raise productivity?

This is where the gap between experience and measurement is widest.

What people report

In McKinsey's survey, **80%** of respondents said AI had improved their own productivity, but only **37%** reported any contribution to their organisation's operating profit.[4] In the UK, 50% of businesses using AI reported higher employee productivity, 42% no change and 4% a decrease.[1]

What executives estimate

A survey of senior executives in seven countries, published as a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, found they estimated that AI had raised annual labour productivity growth by 0.2% over the previous three years, and expected 0.6% a year over the next three.[8] A related study of nearly 750 corporate executives found that perceived productivity gains were larger than measured ones.[9]

What has been measured

- Federal Reserve staff concluded that AI's effect on total US productivity growth **appeared small so far**, and that a recent pickup probably began before generative AI. It is a staff paper, not the Federal Reserve's official view.[10]
- A study of Microsoft engineers found that those who adopted command-line coding agents merged about 24% more pull requests than expected. It is an observational preprint, and merged requests measure output, not value.[11]
- A controlled trial by METR using early-2025 tools found experienced developers took 19% longer with AI. Its later data pointed towards a speed-up but, in METR's view, gave an unreliable signal.[12] The early result should not be quoted as current.
- PwC reports that companies in the most AI-exposed sectors saw faster productivity growth from 2018 to 2025.[13] The starting year is before generative AI, and exposure is not the same as use.

Our reading: some tasks clearly change. Turning that into better results for a whole business is not automatic. Measure outcomes you care about, not only whether people feel faster.

4. Are jobs disappearing?

So far

- In UK official statistics for September 2026, 6% of AI-using businesses with ten or more employees reported lower headcount because of AI, and fewer than 1% reported higher. Administrative and clerical roles were most often named as most affected.[2]
- In US Census data covering late 2025 and early 2026, about **95%** of AI-using firms reported no AI-driven change in employment over six months. About 2% reported a decrease.[6]

- In McKinsey's survey, **14%** of respondents at organisations using AI said it had contributed to a smaller overall workforce in the past year.[4]
- The seven-country executive survey found essentially no net effect of AI on employment at their firms over three years.[8]
- A Yale Budget Lab tracker using US data to August 2026 found no clear evidence of AI-related disruption across the labour market.[14] Broad data can miss effects concentrated in some groups.
- In Denmark, a study linking surveys to official records found no meaningful effect on earnings or hours in exposed occupations two years after ChatGPT appeared.[15] It describes the chatbot period, not today's agents.

Expectations and outcomes differ

McKinsey's own comparison is worth holding on to. In its 2025 survey, 32% of respondents expected AI to reduce their workforce. In 2026, 14% said it had. Expectations have since risen: **39%** now expect a reduction in the coming year, while 43% expect little or no change.[4] The two surveys are not described as following the same organisations.

Forecasts

- McKinsey Global Institute's US scenario to 2035 estimates that automation could reduce labour demand by the equivalent of about 36 million jobs, while other sources of growth could create more than 40 million. It estimates that about 11 million workers might need to change occupation, within a range of 6 to 16 million. These are modelled job equivalents, not predicted redundancies.[16]
- The US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects total employment growing 3.5% from 2025 to 2035, with office and administrative support falling 4.0% and professional, scientific and technical services growing 8.6%. Many factors drive these, not only AI.[17]
- The International Labour Organization estimates that one in four workers globally are in an occupation with some exposure to generative AI, and 3.3% of employment falls in its highest exposure group.[18] **Exposure is not job loss**: the paper says change to jobs is the most likely effect.

5. What is happening to entry-level hiring?

This deserves close attention, because decisions made now shape who can fill senior roles later. The sources do not agree on the cause.

Source	Finding	Caution
Stanford Digital Economy Lab, US payroll data[19]	Employment of 22 to 25 year olds in AI-exposed occupations was about 19% below the path of their peers in less-exposed ones, mainly through less hiring. No similar gap for experienced workers.	A relative gap, not a 19% fall in jobs. The authors describe it as descriptive, not causal.
LinkedIn, five countries to June 2026[20]	UK entry-level hiring fell 13.4% year on year, against 13.0% overall. In occupations LinkedIn calls AI-augmented, entry-level hiring was weaker than hiring overall in all five markets.	Platform data. LinkedIn does not find evidence of a widespread AI-driven decline.
UK government and LinkedIn snapshot[21]	Entry-level hiring was falling in step with the wider market. Engineering entry roles fell more than senior ones.	The report says this is not yet causal evidence about AI.
PwC job advert analysis[13]	In US entry-level adverts, the most AI-exposed roles were far more likely to ask for skills usually expected of senior people.	Measures adverts, not hires.

Our reading: there is enough here to act carefully, not enough to be certain. If AI takes over the tasks juniors used to learn from, decide deliberately how your next experienced people will gain judgement.

6. How are skills changing?

- McKinsey Global Institute found more than 70% of the skills US employers seek are used both in work that could be automated and work that could not, and that demand for AI fluency in US job adverts rose nearly sevenfold in two years.[22]
- Its analysis of ten European countries, including the UK, estimates that 58% of work hours could technically be automated by agents and robots. It states that this shows **technical feasibility, not a forecast** of adoption or job losses.[23]
- PwC found adverts asking for specific AI skills grew 69%, against 9% for all adverts, with an average advertised pay premium of 62%.[13] An advertised premium is not the raise a person gets by learning a tool.
- The International Monetary Fund found about one in ten vacancies in advanced economies asks for at least one new skill. This includes more than AI skills.[24]

For hiring, the practical point is to define the skills behind a role, not just the title, and to test for judgement about AI output as well as the ability to produce it.

7. How are organisations redesigning work?

McKinsey identifies a small group of “high performers”, about 6% of respondents, that report significant value from AI. Nearly three-quarters of them say they have fundamentally redesigned workflows, against about a quarter of others.[4] This is a self-reported association. It does not prove that redesign caused the returns.

In UK government interviews, businesses generally saw the effect on their workforce as gradual rather than disruptive, with some expecting not to replace certain administrative roles.[1] LinkedIn argues that adopting AI is partly a problem of organisational design, and that companies may need to rethink entry-level roles so people keep developing judgement.[25] That is an argument as much as a finding.

8. Claims to handle with care

Claim you may hear	What the source supports
“AI can automate 57% of jobs”	A modelled share of US work **hours** that is technically automatable, expressly not a job-loss forecast[22]
“40% of companies are scaling agents”	Respondents at organisations with $1 billion or more in revenue, in at least one function[4]
“Young workers have lost 19% of jobs to AI”	A relative employment gap in some US occupations, not shown to be caused by AI[19]
“One in four jobs are at risk”	One in four workers are in occupations with **some** exposure[18]
“AI makes developers 19% slower”	One early-2025 trial of a small expert group, since overtaken[12]

9. Planning your next team

The evidence cannot tell you which roles your company needs. This framework can help you decide, using your own work.

Start with the work

Ask: **if you had 20% more customers tomorrow, how would your team need to expand to cope?** Then list the work, team by team, as tasks people would recognise from their week.

For each, note how often it happens, how you would know it was done well and what happens if it goes wrong.

Choose one of four answers

1. **Hire**, where the work needs judgement, trust, relationships or ownership, and there is enough for a role.
2. **Automate**, where the work is routine, inputs are consistent and a person can check the output. Give every agent or workflow an owner.
3. **Redeploy**, where someone already in the team can take on new work with training. Answer early what AI means for people; they will ask.
4. **Leave it**, where the work no longer earns its place.

Give freed time a destination

For each saving, say whether the time goes into growth, into a new role or is left unfilled as people move on. Write it beside the saving so the same hours are not promised twice.

Protect the route in

Name the tasks early-career people learn from. If some are automated, replace the learning on purpose: pairing, reviewing AI output with a senior colleague, or rotations.

Review it every quarter

Check	Question
Outcomes	Did quality, speed or cost change on the measures we chose?
Ownership	Who checks each agent or automation, and what did they find?
Capacity	Where did freed time actually go?
People	Which skills are we building, and who is not getting the chance?
Plan	Which role is no longer needed, and which new one is?

What would change our view

We will revisit this paper as new evidence arrives. Signs worth watching include measured productivity gains showing up in company accounts and national statistics; official data showing larger employment effects; longer, causal studies of early-career hiring; and wider, deeper use of agents outside the largest organisations.

Where Ryzon fits

Ryzon's AI operations partners begin with a fixed-fee two-week audit that maps how work is done and ends in a hiring plan. Our embedded talent partners hire the people it calls for. For a lighter planning method, read strategic workforce planning for scale-ups.

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Common questions

Will AI agents replace people?

The evidence we reviewed does not show widespread replacement so far. It shows tasks changing, some roles under pressure, particularly for early-career workers in some analyses, and many organisations still at an early stage with agents. Forecasts vary widely and should not be read as facts.

How many businesses use AI agents?

It depends who is asked. The UK government's survey found 2% of businesses with five or more employees using or piloting agentic AI in early 2026. McKinsey's global survey found larger shares of its respondents scaling agents in at least one function. The two measure different populations in different ways.

What should a scale-up do first?

List the work your next stage needs, then decide for each part whether a person, an agent, an existing team member or nobody should do it. Check the results against your own numbers each quarter.
