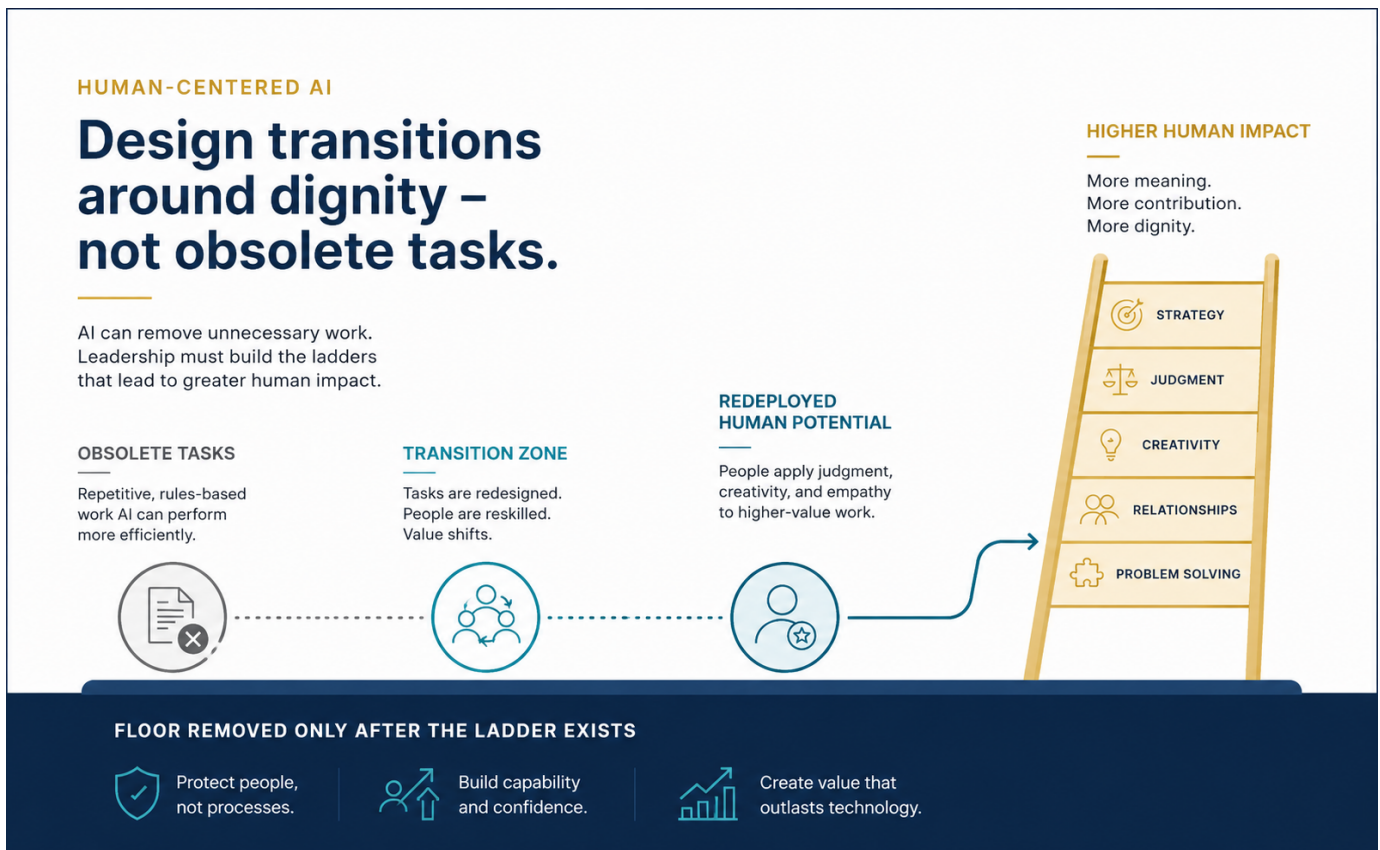


EXECUTIVE THOUGHT PIECE

# Dignity Is Not Redundancy

How leaders should rethink AI, work, and the jobs they think they are saving.



By Chris White | May 2026

**Protect dignity, not redundancy.  
Build ladders before removing floors.**

## IDEA IN BRIEF

# The False Choice: Efficiency Or Employment

The public debate about artificial intelligence is too often reduced to a binary: either embrace efficiency and accept displacement, or defend jobs by preserving work that technology can now perform. That is a bad frame. Leaders should protect workers, not obsolete workflows. They should preserve dignity, not redundancy.

## THE PROBLEM

AI can remove baseline tasks faster than organizations can redesign roles, training, compensation, and status.

## THE TRAP

Defending jobs by preserving redundancy can sound humane while quietly keeping people in low-growth positions.

## THE ARGUMENT

Work has dignity because the worker has dignity. A redundant task does not become dignified merely because a person is required to keep doing it.

## THE LEADERSHIP MOVE

Attach every AI adoption plan to a human-development plan: voice, training, shared gains, new ladders, and preserved formative work.

## THESIS

**Baseline work is real work. Baseline people are not a thing.**

## Why This Matters Now

Institutional sources do not support either panic or complacency. The ILO has concluded that generative AI is more likely to augment jobs than destroy whole occupations, while warning that clerical work is especially exposed. The IMF estimates that almost 40% of global employment is exposed to AI, with about 60% exposed in advanced economies. The OECD sees benefits to productivity and job quality, but also risks involving automation, loss of agency, bias, privacy, and opacity. [3] [4] [5]

At the same time, current labor-market evidence remains early and mixed. Yale Budget Lab reported in April 2026 that exposure, automation, and augmentation measures show no clear relationship to employment or unemployment changes, and Brookings cautioned that the present evidence is inconclusive and weak as a signal for the future. [6] [7]

## THE MORAL FOUNDATION

# The Dignity Of Work Is Not The Dignity Of Inefficiency

Work is not merely a transaction. It structures time, conveys belonging, forms skill, supports families, and allows people to contribute to a community. That is why arguments about AI and employment cannot be handled as a narrow technology procurement issue. They are questions of human order.

Catholic social teaching expresses the point with unusual clarity: the economy must serve people, not the other way around; work is more than a way to make a living. John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* similarly grounds the value of work in the worker, insisting that work is for the person and not the person for work. [1] [2]

That principle should make leaders careful in both directions. It should prevent them from sneering at routine, clerical, administrative, service, or support work. The person who maintains a closing checklist, reconciles a file, catches a missing exhibit, or keeps the back office moving is not doing less human work because the work is repetitive. Routine work can require memory, care, discipline, practical judgment, and pride.

But the same principle also prevents leaders from romanticizing redundancy. If a task is retained only because no one has built a better path for the worker, then the organization is not honoring dignity. It is outsourcing its lack of imagination onto the employee.

## LEADERSHIP DISTINCTION

**The dignity belongs to the worker. The redundancy belongs to the system.**

## The Better Rule

The goal is not to eliminate every routine. Some repetition teaches mastery. Some predictable work is preferred. Some basic work is formative. But if the work is unnecessary and the worker has no path beyond it, preservation becomes a disguised form of stagnation.

A dignity-preserving organization does not say, "AI can do this, so the person is expendable." It also does not say, "This person has always done this, so the task must remain." It asks a harder question: "What capability, status, income, training, and responsibility can this person now claim because the tool has removed unnecessary toil?"

## THE EVIDENCE

# Exposure Is Not Destiny

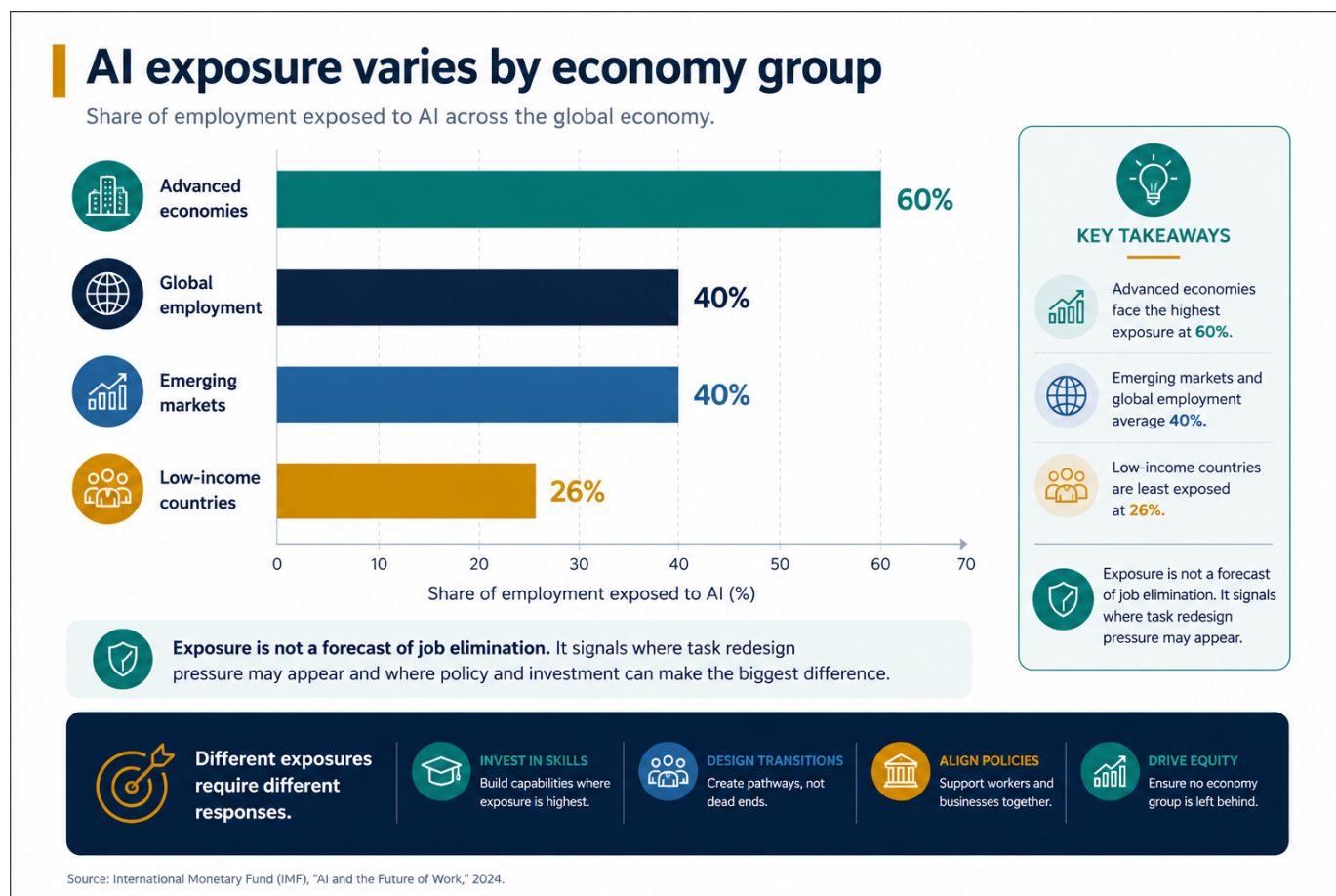


Figure 1 IMF, *Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work, Staff Discussion Note, 2024*; see also IMF Blog, "AI Will Transform the Global Economy. Let's Make Sure It Benefits Humanity." [4]

The most responsible reading of the evidence is neither "AI will destroy work" nor "AI will naturally create better work." AI changes tasks first. Then it changes roles, training needs, bargaining power, margins, and eventually job design. David Autor's work on automation remains useful here: automation substitutes for some labor, complements other labor, raises output, and changes what human tasks become valuable. [12]

This matters because the public conversation often treats a job title as a solid object. It is not. A job is a bundle of tasks, responsibilities, relationships, permissions, and expectations. AI may remove one portion of that bundle while making another portion more important.

The leadership failure is not adopting AI. The failure is adopting AI as a cost-cutting device without redesigning the bundle around human contribution.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

# The Class Problem Hiding In Plain Sight

A familiar anti-AI argument says: some people want baseline work, some people are good at it, and AI eliminates their jobs. There is a humane version of that argument. Some people do prefer predictable work. Some people do not want constant ambiguity, client conflict, or managerial pressure. That preference deserves respect.

But the argument becomes dangerous when it turns present assignment into presumed destiny. "They are good at that work" can mean "they have skill." It can also mean "that is their place." The difference is morally significant.

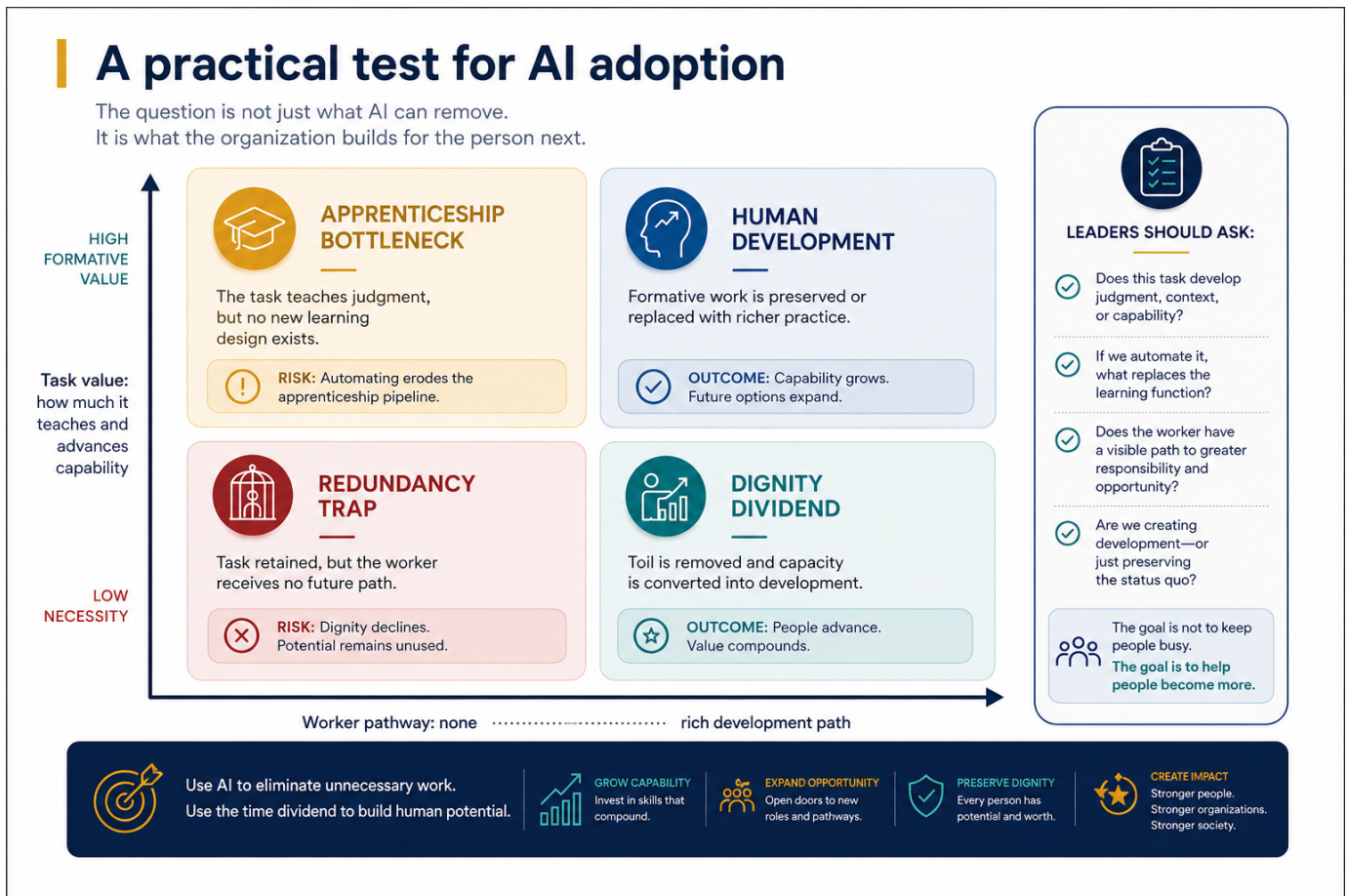


Figure 2. A decision matrix for distinguishing dignity-preserving AI adoption from redundancy preservation. Conceptual framework; not empirical data.

The class-coded version of the argument protects a social arrangement instead of a person. It assumes some people execute while others decide; some people process while others judge; some people are developed while others are retained. A worker-centered version reaches a different conclusion: if the task changes, the person should be offered a path to change with it.

**STATUS TEST**

**Would we be satisfied if our own child were permanently assigned the role because "that is what they are good at"?**

## THE LAZY SUBSTITUTE

# "Saving Jobs" Can Become A Moral Shortcut

Job preservation sounds humane. Sometimes it is. Income, benefits, community identity, and a person's place in the economic order are not abstractions. A leader who treats displacement as collateral damage is not being innovative; he is being reckless.

But "saving jobs" is not the same as preserving dignity. A job can be preserved while the worker's agency, wages, training, status, and future are quietly diminished. Conversely, a task can disappear while the worker becomes more capable, better paid, and more central to the organization.

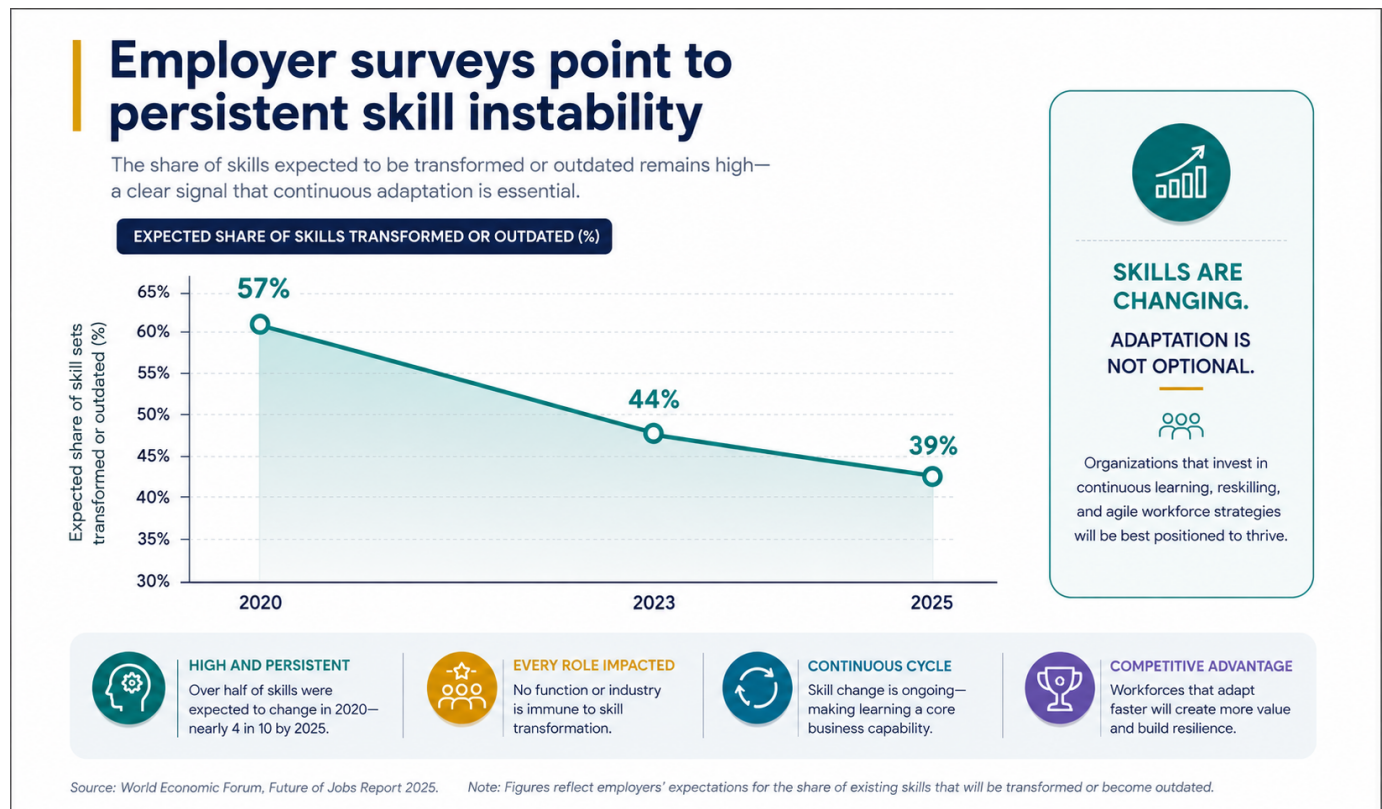


Figure 3. WEF employer survey data on expected skill instability. Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025. [8]

The World Economic Forum's 2025 employer survey found that, on average, workers can expect 39% of existing skill sets to be transformed or outdated over 2025-2030, down from 44% in 2023 and 57% in 2020. That is not an argument for panic. It is an argument for infrastructure. Training cannot be an inspirational poster hung near the coffee machine. It has to be designed, funded, measured, and rewarded. [8]

The old economy often treated training as something workers should somehow obtain on their own time, with their own money, after their existing work was finished. That approach will not survive the AI transition with dignity intact.

## THE PRO-AI MISTAKE

# Efficiency Is A Moral Event

The pro-AI camp also has a blind spot. It often assumes that if technology eliminates redundant work, people will naturally be "redeployed higher." That is a comforting sentence. It is not a plan.

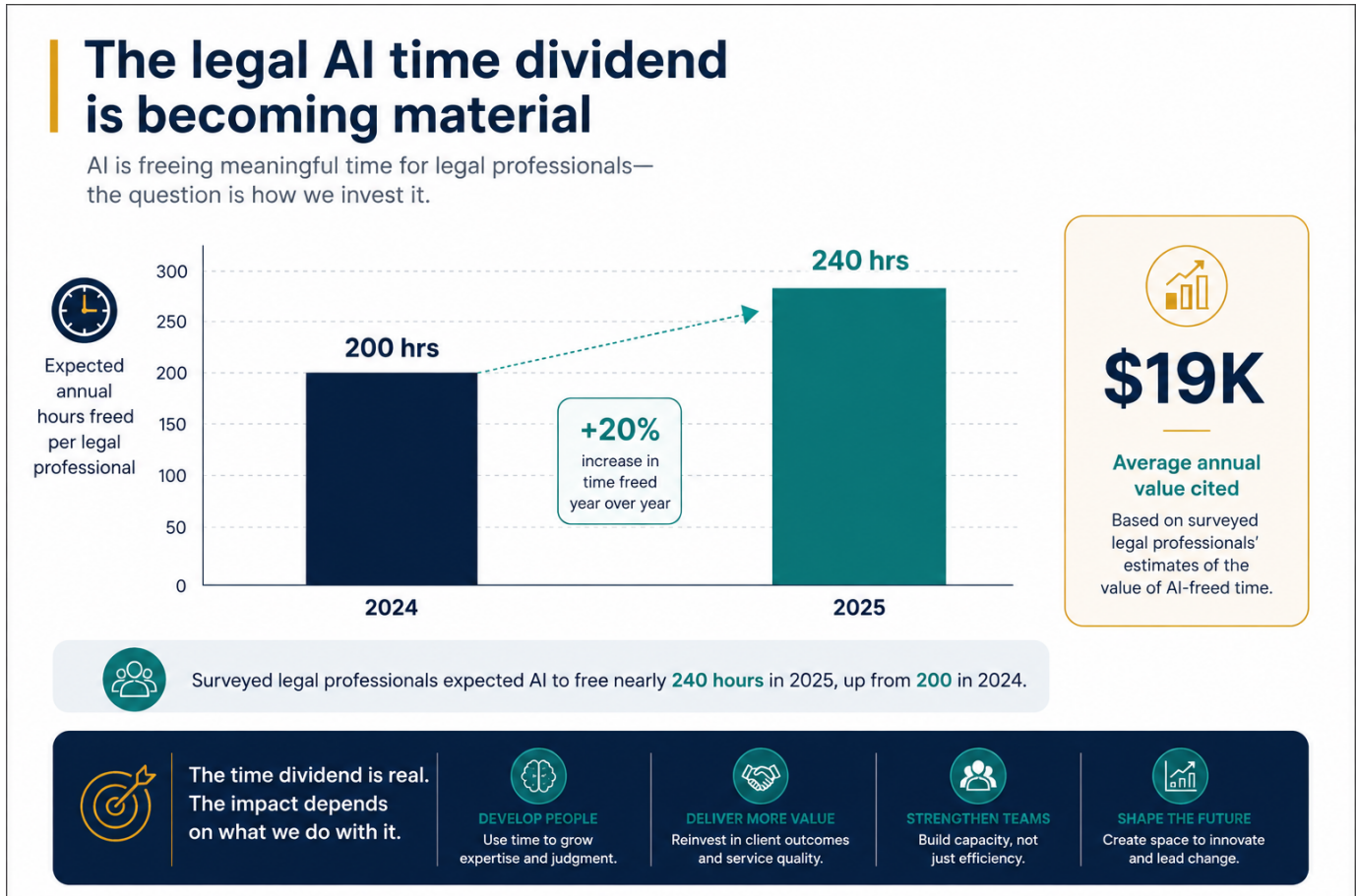


Figure 4. Surveyed legal professionals expected AI to free nearly 240 hours in 2025, up from 200 in 2024. Source: Future of Professionals Report 2025. [9]

In professional services, the time dividend is becoming material. Thomson Reuters' 2025 Future of Professionals Report states that surveyed legal professionals expected AI to free nearly 240 hours per year, up from 200 in 2024, with an average annual value of \$19,000 per professional. [9]

That reclaimed time will go somewhere. It can become margin. It can become lower client cost. It can become better service. It can become training. It can become humane workloads. It can become business development. It can become layoffs. The technology does not decide. Leaders do.

## MANAGEMENT TEST

**The moral test of AI adoption is not whether it saves time. It is what the organization does with the time it saves.**

A leader who adopts AI without deciding how the gains will be shared has not implemented a technology strategy. He has merely created a surplus and left power to allocate it.

## CASE STUDY: LAW

# Do Not Automate Apprenticeship By Accident

Law is a useful test case because it contains both the promise and the danger. AI can reduce time spent on routine drafting, summarization, document review, first-pass research, contract analysis, and administrative coordination. That is real value.

But many of those basic tasks have also served as the training ground for judgment. Thomson Reuters has warned that as AI becomes more integrated into legal workflows, traditional training grounds may narrow, including basic research, first drafts, cite-checking, and document review. [10]

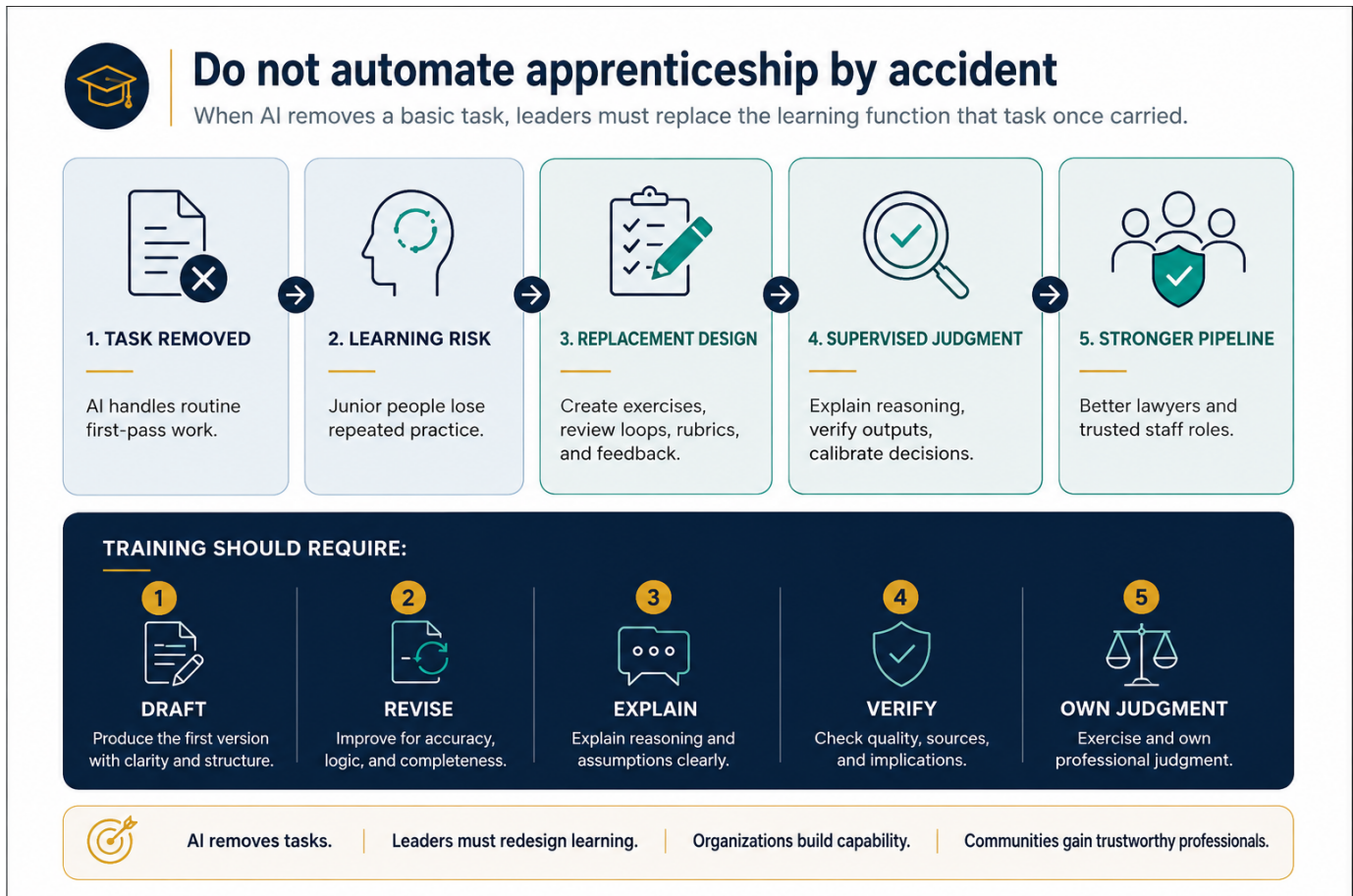


Figure 5. Law firm AI adoption must replace lost training functions, not merely remove junior tasks. Conceptual leadership framework; not empirical data.

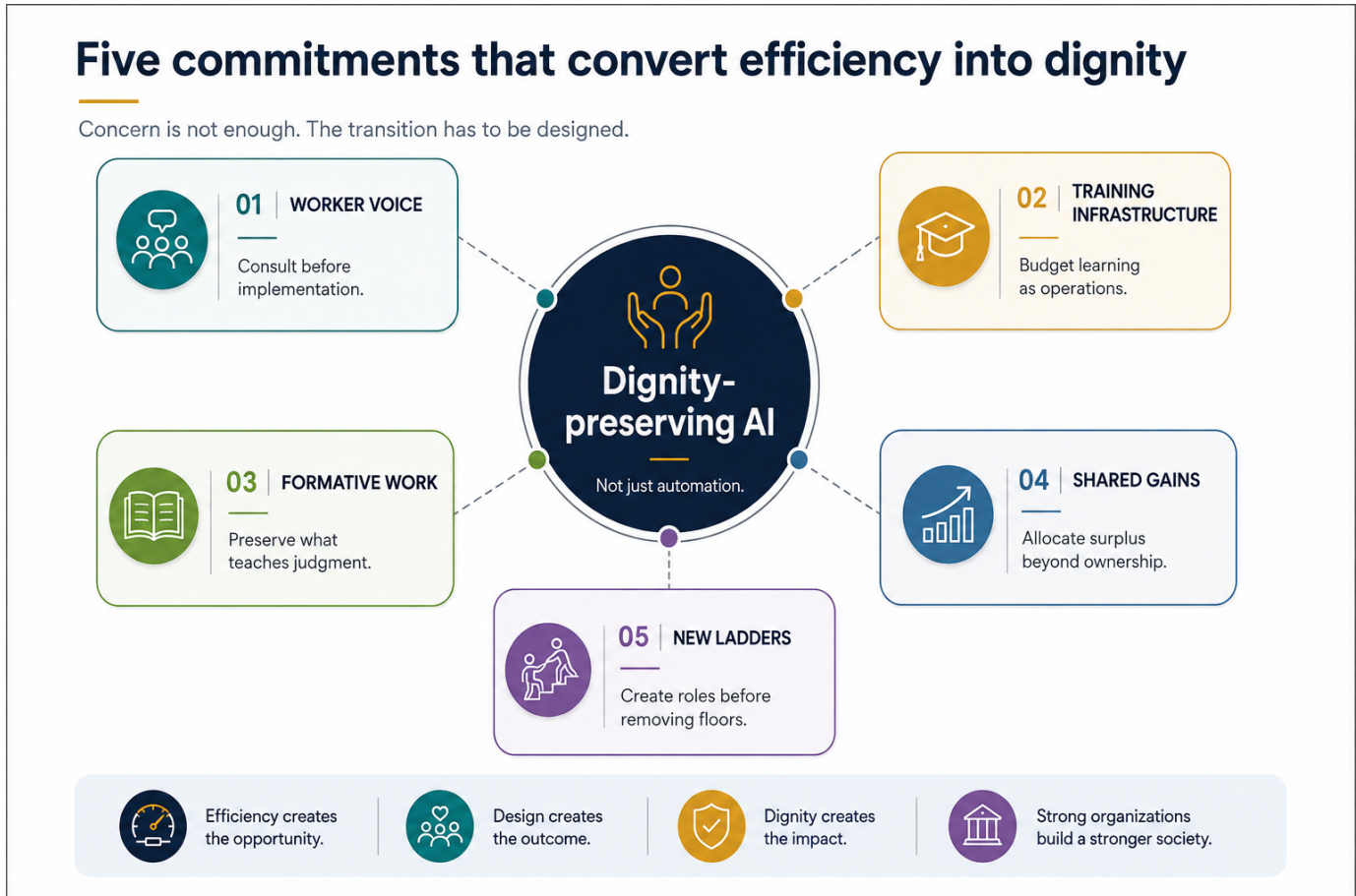
The ethical overlay matters as well. ABA Formal Opinion 512 reminds lawyers using generative AI that existing duties still apply, including competence, confidentiality, communication, supervision, and reasonable fees. [11]

For law firms, the right rule is direct: every AI adoption plan needs a human-development plan. If AI takes away a junior lawyer's first draft, the firm must create another way to teach the reasoning that first drafts once forced. If AI reduces staff time spent on formatting, scheduling, or intake routing, the firm must decide whether that time becomes client service, quality control, legal operations, training, or merely headcount reduction.

## THE HARDER WORK

# Build Dignity-Preserving Systems

The hardest work is not defending existing jobs from the "threat of AI." The hardest work is building industries and economic systems where people do not depend on obsolete tasks for survival.



*Figure 6. A five-part system for preserving dignity while adopting AI. Conceptual framework built from the source evidence and leadership implications.*

A dignity-preserving system requires more than concern. It requires design. Worker voice should come before implementation, not after rumor. Training should be budgeted as operating infrastructure, not treated as charity. Productivity gains should be shared through wages, time, quality, client value, or advancement. New ladders should be created before old floors are removed. And formative work should be preserved where it teaches judgment, even if AI could perform the task faster.

This is not softness. It is strategic realism. Organizations that do not build human capability around AI will eventually face brittle expertise, weaker trust, poorer supervision, and a thinner leadership pipeline.

## LEADER'S CHECKLIST

## Before AI Replaces A Task, Ask These Questions

1. Is the task unnecessary, or merely lower-status?	6. Will productivity gains be shared with workers, clients, or only ownership?
2. Does this task teach judgment, pattern recognition, or professional discipline?	7. How will quality, confidentiality, bias, and accountability be supervised?
3. Who currently performs the task, and have they been consulted before the decision is made?	8. What training budget accompanies the tool budget?
4. What income, status, or advancement risk does automation create for that person?	9. What will junior people no longer learn if this task disappears?
5. What new role, responsibility, or development path will absorb the freed capacity?	10. Would we defend this same redundancy if it were being performed by someone with higher status?

## OPERATIONAL RULE

**No AI task automation without a human-development plan.**

### A Better Principle

The answer to AI displacement is not to freeze the economy in place. That is impractical and morally insufficient. But neither is the answer to charge forward with a spreadsheet definition of progress, measuring success only by reduced labor cost and faster throughput.

A better principle is: eliminate unnecessary toil, not necessary people. Protect dignity, not redundancy. Build ladders before removing floors.

AI may force organizations to confront a truth that was already present: many economic systems were not built to protect dignity. They were built to allocate labor. If technology now makes that allocation unstable, the disruption is not merely technical. It is moral.

## SOURCE NOTES

# Evidence Base And Source Notes

The following sources were retained from the original draft and selected for institutional authority, primary-source status, or widely cited peer-reviewed analysis. Forward-looking labor-market claims are treated as estimates or survey findings, not as certainties.

- [1] USCCB, "The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers." Used for the social teaching frame that the economy must serve people and that work is more than a way to make a living. [Source](#)
- [2] John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981). Used for the proposition that the value of work is grounded in the person and that work is for the human person, not the person for work. [Source](#)
- [3] International Labour Organization, "Generative AI likely to augment rather than destroy jobs" (Aug. 21, 2023). Used for the claim that generative AI is more likely to augment than destroy jobs and that clerical work has the greatest exposure. [Source](#)
- [4] International Monetary Fund, "AI Will Transform the Global Economy. Let's Make Sure It Benefits Humanity" (Jan. 14, 2024). Used for employment exposure estimates: almost 40% globally, about 60% in advanced economies, 40% in emerging markets, and 26% in low-income countries. [Source](#)
- [5] OECD, "AI and work" and OECD AI workplace survey findings. Used for the balanced benefits/risks frame and for the finding that training and worker consultation are associated with better worker outcomes. [Source](#)
- [6] Yale Budget Lab, "Tracking the Impact of AI on the Labor Market" (Apr. 16, 2026). Used for the caution that exposure, automation, and augmentation measures currently show no clear relationship to employment or unemployment changes. [Source](#)
- [7] Brookings, "Research on AI and the labor market is still in the first inning" (Mar. 10, 2026). Used for the caution that current evidence on AI and labor demand is inconclusive and still a weak signal for the future. [Source](#)
- [8] World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025 digest. Used for employer survey data on skill instability: 39% in 2025, down from 44% in 2023 and 57% in 2020. [Source](#)
- [9] Thomson Reuters, Future of Professionals Report 2025. Used for surveyed legal professionals' expected annual hours freed by AI: nearly 240 hours in 2025, up from 200 in 2024, and average annual value of \$19,000 per professional. [Source](#)
- [10] Thomson Reuters Institute, "Legal training in the age of AI: A leadership imperative" (Apr. 30, 2025). Used for the legal training concern that basic research, first drafts, cite-checking, and document review may narrow as training grounds. [Source](#)
- [11] American Bar Association, announcement of Formal Opinion 512 (July 29, 2024). Used for the statement that existing lawyer duties apply to generative AI: competence, confidentiality, communication, supervision, and reasonable fees. [Source](#)
- [12] David H. Autor, "Why Are There Still So Many Jobs? The History and Future of Workplace Automation," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 29(3), 2015. Used for the economic frame that automation substitutes for some labor, complements other labor, raises output, and changes labor demand. [Source](#)

## Caution On Interpretation

The charts in this piece distinguish exposure, skill change, and time savings from actual job loss. They should not be read as forecasts that a specific occupation, firm, or employee group will experience a specific outcome. The practical conclusion is narrower: AI adoption needs explicit human-development design because the market will not automatically protect dignity.