



The End of the Career Ladder? Rethinking Work in the Age of AI

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AI now presents us with multiple options for the future of work and employment, but in reality, it will probably boil down to only two:

Either increase potential by yoking AI to human effort, as outlined in the Bloor FusionWork™ initiative or go all-out to replace as many employees as is possible with AI agents.

Sadly, the past 40 years have shown us that the latter course is more likely, as Boards obsess about headcount, in part due to the cost of hiring people rising all the time as well as commensurate compliance risks.

Even if employers favoured the first approach, they would be faced with an unexpected dilemma: increased potential to do what, exactly? If you are spending more time cutting costs for whatever reasons, where is the drive for new business coming from, that would require the extra potential on offer?

Let's face it, a proportion of jobs will be lost to automation or AI agents in any case and perhaps a considerable number of these jobs should have been mechanised some time ago. What it does spell out though, is that entry-level job opportunities, usually of a routine nature, will be reduced, and this will exacerbate the already thorny problem of youth unemployment.

One unpredicted by-product of all this Change could well be the end of the traditional career ladder, as there will be nothing left to climb in the face of wholesale disintegration of existing roles. Work itself is well overdue for analysis and re-distribution which inevitably will result in some people being contracted for less time to complete the required work.

In the light of this, it would make sense for people to contract with more than one employer on a 'fractional' basis and there are a number of roles and functions that would immediately lend themselves to this. In fact, it would offer a variety and breadth of experience not currently available in the classic 9-5 five days per week set-up.

The decreasing importance of the career ladder would in fact open avenues to many more than just those with exceptional commercial talents. Its demise should not be seen as a loss, but instead as an opportunity to reinvent how we think about work and growth. Rather than climbing that 'greasy pole' – not always due to ability and achievement! individuals may find themselves curating a portfolio of roles, experiences, and skills that evolve with market demands and technological advances.

This shift places adaptability, continuous learning, and professional breadth at the core of employability and individuals should take notice of this.

For organisations, the challenge will be to reimagine talent strategies that go beyond headcount reduction and instead embrace flexibility, shared value, and innovation.

If leaders can harness AI as a tool for human enablement rather than replacement, the future of work could be less about ladders and more about networks—dynamic, interconnected pathways that offer new opportunities for both businesses and individuals.

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