

Cut the Bottom Rung Today and There's No Middle Management in Five Years

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The entry-level roles AI automates most easily are the ones people learn through. Why removing them is a fifteen-year workforce risk being decided on this year's P&L

The rung you're removing

The entry-level roles Artificial Intelligence (AI) automates most readily are administration, coordination, research support and first-line service. On a spreadsheet they look like the obvious place to start. The work is repetitive, well defined and easy to hand to a machine.

They are also the roles through which people have always learned how an organisation actually works from the inside. Who to ask. How decisions really get made. What good looks like before anyone writes it down. Most of the senior people reading this learned their trade on exactly those rungs.

Removing them doesn't just remove jobs. It removes the learning pathway.

There is a reason this hasn't shown up yet. The cost of a missing entry-level role is invisible in the year you remove it. Nobody notices the learning that didn't happen. It shows up years later, as a vacancy you can't fill and a promotion you can't make.

I want to make this argument without sentiment. This isn't a plea to be nice to graduates. It is a fifteen-year workforce capability risk, and it is being decided on this year's profit and loss (P&L).

Pipeline maths

Start with the maths, because it is unforgiving. A middle manager is typically someone with five to ten years of experience. The people who will be your managers in the early 2030s are entering the workforce now. If they can't get in, or get in without learning anything, there is nobody to promote.

And the door is narrowing. Analysis by the job search site Adzuna found that UK entry-level vacancies fell by nearly a third in the two and a half years after ChatGPT launched in November 2022.

The pipeline doesn't grow back quickly. You can't hire five years of experience in a hurry, because nobody else has been growing it either. When everyone cuts the bottom rung at once, the market for mid-level talent tightens for everyone at the same time.

So the organisation that saves on its graduate intake today buys that capability back later, at a market premium, from the few organisations that kept training people. If there are any.

It also concentrates risk. In many organisations, a handful of experienced people already carry the invisible third of the work: the context, the relationships, the workarounds nobody wrote down. Without a pipeline behind them, every retirement and resignation takes some of that knowledge out of the building for good.

The demographic collision

Now add the demographics. The total fertility rate in England and Wales fell to 1.39 children per woman in 2025, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). That is below the 1.41 recorded in 2024, which was itself the lowest on record, and well below the replacement rate of 2.1.

At the same time, the ONS estimates that 981,000 young people aged 16 to 24 were not in education, employment or training (NEET) between April and June 2026. That is around one in eight of the age group.

Put those together and you get a strange picture: fewer young people coming through, and a large share of the ones we have already shut out.

These are not separate stories. People form households and have children when they can see a stable future. A generation that can't see a way in is responding rationally to the conditions in front of it. Every rung we remove makes that future harder to see.

For an employer, the consequence is simple. The pool of future talent is getting smaller, and we are making less of it usable.

Employers can't fix the birth rate. They can decide whether the young people who do arrive find a way in.

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29%, and why it isn't resistance

Then there is the workforce you already have. A 2026 survey of 2,400 knowledge workers and executives by WRITER and Workplace Intelligence found that 29% admit to actively undermining their employer's AI strategy. Among Generation Z (Gen Z) workers, it was 44%.

It is tempting to read that as resistance to change. A bit of digital-native sulking. I'd read it differently.

Employees can read. They see the same internal communications and investor updates that describe AI as the route to leaner teams. If the strategy says your job is the efficiency saving, undermining the strategy is not irrational. It is self-protection.

And here is the paradox. The organisations most aggressively marginalising people who push back on AI are often the most dependent on exactly the digitally fluent cohort they are alienating. Gen Z are the people who will make your AI work. Right now, they are also the people with the least reason to help.

Notice what that survey is really measuring. It isn't a skills gap. These are often the people most comfortable with the tools. It is a trust gap: they don't believe the strategy has a place for them.

You don't fix that with a change programme. You fix it by giving people a future inside the design.

Design the entry pathway deliberately

The answer is not to protect every entry-level role exactly as it is. Some of that work should go. The answer is to design the way in, rather than delete it by default.

A fused entry-level role looks different from the old one. The routine tasks go to digital systems. What is left is the learning: working alongside experienced people on real problems, checking and correcting AI output, handling the exceptions, and building the judgement the machine can't. It is the choice I described earlier in this series between Human-in-the-Loop and AI-in-the-Loop, applied to the people with the most to learn.

That only works if someone designs it on purpose. Map what new starters actually learn from today's roles. Decide which parts of that learning you need to keep. Then build roles, with real development budgets, around keeping it.

Some organisations already do a version of this through apprenticeships and graduate rotations. The difference now is that the routine tasks those schemes were built around are disappearing. A rotation through work an agent now does teaches nothing. The design has to start from the learning, not the old task list.

Measure it, too. Track how many people you bring in each year, how quickly they progress, and how many of your future managers you are actually growing. If that number is falling while your AI savings rise, you are spending your future to fund your present.

A fifteen-year risk on this year's P&L

Every one of these decisions shows up as a saving this year. The cost shows up later, on someone else's watch, as a missing layer of managers, a shrinking talent pool and a workforce that has stopped trusting the strategy.

If you are a Chief People Officer, this is the case to take to the board. Not as a social commitment, but as a capability risk with a date attached.

> ***The question is not whether young people will enter a transformed world of work. It is whether the way in has been designed, or simply automated away. The difference between those two futures is not the technology. It is the decisions made now.***

Cut the bottom rung today and there is no middle management in five years. Design the way in now, or pay a premium to buy it back later.

The full research on workforce sustainability is in the Bloor Research white paper *FusionWork™: Defining a New Category of Work*.
You can download it here.

This is the ninth article in a series drawn from that paper. The first asked why approximately 90% of job descriptions no longer describe the job. The eighth argued that workforce sustainability is ESG's missing fourth pillar.

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