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Exploring the new
future of work

Introduction

In early 2025, a leading AI company ran an unusual experiment: The company connected one of its large language models to an in-office vending machine, allowing it to spend a month managing inventory, marketing products, determining prices, and otherwise running the vending machine as a small business.¹ The autonomous vending machine struggled to make money. In just a month, it mismanaged its product assortment, regularly offered discount codes that undermined profitability, and ultimately lost almost a quarter of its net worth. However, the experiment was less about making money and more about exploring “the plausible, strange, not-too-distant future in which AI models are autonomously running things in the real economy.”

This possibility—that we may be entering a world in which work and organizational activity are directed by nonhuman actors—is one of a set of transformational possibilities that are emerging over the next decade with the potential to impact the future of work in profound and unexpected ways. In fact, one recent study found that 36% of today’s managers expect to be managing digital agents within the next five years.² What does an organizational chart look like in this future? What does decision-making look like in a world of always-on agentic bots directing organizational activity? What roles will humans play in this world? How will teams collaborate?

The need to adapt to rapid change isn’t a new one. In recent years, leaders had to remake their strategies and operational models to incorporate once-fringe concepts like the extended workforce and skills-based hiring. Today’s leaders need to prepare for a future of work marked by radically divergent possibilities stemming from technological, social, economic, environmental, and policy change. The rise of agentic technology is just one example. As organizations seek to optimize the value of AI tools, they will need to do so in a period of unprecedented demographic shifts—toward a world where one in six people globally will be over the age of 60.³ As forces like AI and demographic change intersect in the coming years, and as the pace of change continues to accelerate, organizations may even need to rethink the nature of expertise, knowledge and the value of generalists over specialists to drive innovation and value.⁴ One writer and financial regulator recently identified core tensions facing today’s decision-makers: “The great irony—perhaps the tragedy—of our time is that just at the moment when we have delegated so much important decision-making to data, models and evidence, we are faced with so many problems that aren’t in the dataset because they have never happened before.”⁵



Why 'the new' future of work?

No one doubts that the “future of work” is changing and is no longer the “future” but the present. The “future of work” as a field took shape in the early 2000s, with books like *The Future of Work* (2004) by Tom Malone, matured in the 2010s, and became globally urgent during the COVID-19 crisis. These efforts to make sense of the future of work were driven by efforts to improve outcomes like speed, efficiency, and scale while also finding new ways to innovate and create value. Encompassing technology, culture, human capital, equity, and the meaning and structure of work itself, much of the foundational thinking behind what was once the “future of work” has been achieved. These innovations include:



Workplace:

- The rise of virtual work, flexible hours, and telecommuting
- Increasingly decentralized organizations, with transitions from hierarchies into networks and teams of teams
- New workplace technologies like virtual reality and collaboration tools



Work:

- The impact of AI and robotics on work—including the dynamics of task and job displacement versus augmentation, as well as the evolving collaboration between human and machines
- Disaggregation of jobs into tasks, and workers into skills, to be reconfigured into new roles and work bundles—including employees in full-time jobs or redeployed to projects with internal talent marketplaces, external talent, AI, or more
- Decentralized, data-backed decision-making with trust and transparency



Workforce:

- Reskilling and lifelong learning
- The shift from static roles and jobs to dynamic skill sets
- Emphasis on human capabilities like creativity, critical thinking, and empathy
- Workforce ecosystems (including freelancers, contractors, gig workers, AI as talent, alliances and partnerships, and outsourcing, among others)
- The rise of meaning, purpose, belonging, and well-being

As what was once the “future of work” becomes our present reality, it is time to think about what is next on the horizon 5 to 10 years out.

To understand how organizations can prepare for these futures, Deloitte is embarking on an in-depth exploration of the 10-year future of work. To do this, we will follow a multidisciplinary approach by collaborating with visionary thinkers who deeply understand the evolution of work and the organization while also incorporating the voice of the worker.

In the months ahead, we'll be canvassing experts across a wide range of fields—including technologists, business leaders across various fields, academics, foresight leaders and futurists, and more—with an aim of understanding how leading thinkers across the global landscape see the future of work evolving. The goal of this is to take a long-term view on how these forces might play out over the next 5 to 10 years to inform the kinds of early experiments, pilots, and investments organizations can begin making now in order to prepare for the new future of work. To begin this effort, we will focus on four big questions:

1. What will organizations look like in the future? What form will they take?

The organization—as we understand it today—is a relatively recent invention and emerged as part of a set of 19th-century innovations that allowed people to coordinate and collaborate across previously prohibitive geographic boundaries. Even the very concept of standardized time was a by-product of rail travel: Prior to the need to coordinate different trains along different tracks, time itself was a rough approximation rather than a rigorous, universal standard.⁶ Likewise, increasingly large-scale businesses had to develop new tools to organize, visualize, and manage workflows. The first version of an organizational chart was created fewer than 200 years ago by the Erie Railway, which managed several hundred miles of railroad tracks, making it one of the largest railroads of its time.⁷ Over time, tools like this evolved beyond helping leaders visualize business activities. They played a role in professionalizing and codifying roles and expertise, as well as enabling organizations to process information at scale.⁸

Much like leaders at the Erie Railway needed to create new tools to manage responsibilities over time and space, today's leaders are facing a similarly novel question: How can we reimagine the organization in a world in which increasingly large amounts of human agency, collaboration, and productivity may be driven by nonhuman entities? This not only has the potential to transform today's organizational

charts by adding in new kinds of actors but will raise deeper questions about the purpose of the organization, the nature of decision rights, power dynamics, and the kinds of tools and models organizations will need to manage a potential explosion of nonhuman output, even as they operate with today's legacy systems and infrastructure.

In this context, even approaches that suggest that humans focus on the highest-value tasks raise questions around which kinds of tasks are ultimately high value over time, and further, what constitutes “value.” Indeed, as organizations find increasing opportunities to automate today's activities, they will increasingly be challenged to identify opportunities to truly differentiate in the marketplace and deliver products and services that only their organization can produce. In other words, leaders will have to ask: What can we automate? And what should we avoid automating at all costs? What kinds of strategic advantages can we create when the ability to quickly organize resources, inside and outside the firm, replaces the strategic advantage of economies of scale?

And perhaps most importantly, leaders may need to ask: What kinds of differentiation can we create when we don't consider AI as merely a form of digital “labor arbitrage,” and instead focus on the new capabilities that emerge when humans and AI work together in increasingly integrated and collaborative ways—where the boundaries between people and intelligent machines are ever more blurred?

2. What is work, and why will people be working?

As these organizational shifts play out, they will impact the workforce and begin to reshape the nature of work and jobs. In the last decade, many organizations have deconstructed and disaggregated jobs into tasks, a process that was built atop a foundation of technical advances. For instance, the rise of nearly ubiquitous mobile connectivity was key to enabling large-scale gig work services such as ride-sharing and food delivery. The rise of agentic technology may further accelerate this effort to break jobs into tasks, but as this happens, it will raise new questions such as: What are workers doing? How will they—and organizations—reimagine work and jobs to fit into this new world?

As the next decade plays out, organizations may find that there are practical limits to turning jobs into tasks, especially in more complex contexts. Tasks—along with knowledge, wisdom, and context—can bleed into each other in ways that don't have clear boundaries that fit within a task-based framework. Rather than breaking tasks apart, organizations may find they need to encourage workers to focus on broader organizational commitments and goals rather than discrete, measurable tasks as part of a spectrum of different approaches to designing work.⁹

This shift in the nature of work will likely impact today's workers and jobs, but it will also raise other kinds of related questions about the structure of teams, roles, and functions and the nature of career paths, skill development, and how workers manage their growth and development.

3. How will we rethink the roles of leaders, managers, and workers?

As these changes play out, they will influence how organizations conceive of and design the roles of workers, managers, and leaders. We can see signals of this today in the evolving role of the manager: Organizations have begun to reduce the number of management roles in an effort to create flatter structures—with one analysis showing a drop of more than 40% in job postings for middle management roles between April 2022 and October 2024.¹⁰ Even as the number of formal managers has declined, the need to elevate what managers can do—in terms of creating more time and space for coaching more junior workers, redesigning processes, and enabling problem-solving—may be greater than ever.¹¹ This is one of several tensions organizations face when planning for the workforce and organization of the future.

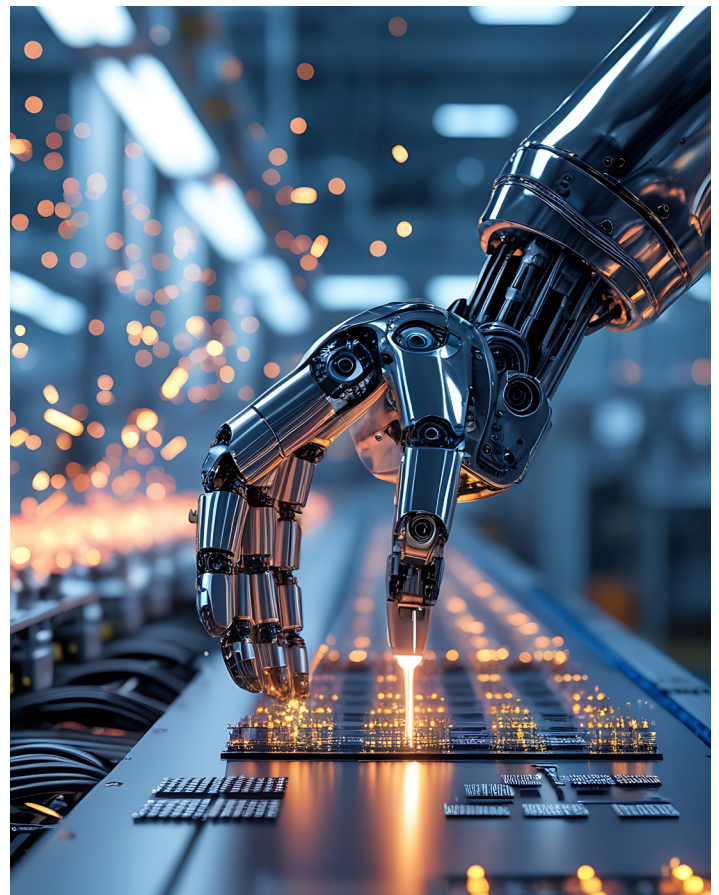
In the years ahead, we may see organizations look to reinvent an increasingly wide variety of roles and job levels. Take entry level roles: As AI has become part of an increasing number of workflows, tasks that were once the responsibility of workers at the beginning of their careers—taking and distributing meeting notes, for example—are automatable. But if increased reliance on these tools results in fewer entry-level roles and opportunities for on-the-job learning, organizations may realize short-term benefits from AI while undermining their ability to develop the pipeline of future thinkers and leaders they will need for longer-term success.¹²

4. What new behaviors, capabilities, and skills will the workforce of the future need?

"I suspect that, as my child comes of age, we will think about 'the programmer' the way we now look back on 'the computer,' when that phrase referred to a person who did calculations by hand."¹³ This quote from a software engineer and writer, reflecting on how the rise of AI coding tools is transforming the nature of coding, hints at some of the deeper questions workers will face in the coming decade: As technical advances and other forces continue to reshape the nature of work and jobs, individuals who tied their identities to a particular role—such as software engineer—may need to fundamentally reimagine how they see their role—and even their very identity—in the workplace.

As part of this reimagining, they will need to reinvent who they are professionally and what they bring to work, and reimagine how they develop and acquire skills and even focus on preparing for career paths that don't yet exist. By one estimate, 65% of kids entering primary school today will go on to work in jobs that don't yet exist.¹⁴ Even seasoned professionals are likely to face questions about skill development: A recent study found that the half-life of technology skills is as little as two-and-a-half years.¹⁵

While the shifting landscape for skills raises questions for individual workers, it also raises questions for leaders about how much to cultivate the skills needed to address today's challenges while also developing the skills that the workforce will need to drive growth over the long term.¹⁶ If these trends continue to play out, organizations may find that it is increasingly important to focus on skills as well as deeper human capabilities that enable the workforce to learn and adapt as the external landscape continues to shift.¹⁷



Preparing for the new future of work

Individually, any of these four questions suggest a substantial set of changes to the nature of work in the coming decade. Taken together, they suggest that we are experiencing a paradigm shift that compels us to redefine a new set of characteristics that define the future of work. In the coming years, leaders may find that even our current constructs, vocabularies, and assumptions—including tools like the organizational chart itself—may no longer be fit for purpose. They could face the dual challenge of managing legacy operations while inventing new processes, practices, and ways of working that are optimized for the future. While this could challenge organizations in numerous ways, it could also present an opportunity to pursue ambitious ideas and goals, and to radically rethink the way that work gets done.

In the months ahead, we'll be exploring these possibilities by canvassing experts and workers, diving deep into future scenarios, and developing new frameworks to help you understand what you can begin doing now to prepare for this new future of work.

We invite you to join us on this journey to explore the new future of work.



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