

Researchers Warn Of ‘Mass Demoralization’ From AI. Here’s How To Avoid It

The biggest workplace risk from AI may not be job loss, but the disappearance of work people find meaningful.

By **Tomas Gorny** · Contributor · Published July 7, 2026, 9:00 a.m. EDT



The real AI risk isn't job loss. It's joy loss. Getty

A group of researchers across three countries have come out with a warning: The biggest danger AI poses to the workforce is not a loss of jobs. Instead, it's the disappearance of types of work that people especially enjoy.

“We argue that a central risk of AI exposure is not mass unemployment but ‘mass demoralization’: a loss of meaning and ownership in day-to-day work.”

FROM THE STUDY, “ARE WE AUTOMATING THE JOY OUT OF WORK?”

The study is titled, “Are We Automating the Joy Out of Work? Designing AI to Augment Work, Not Meaning.”

To determine just how big a danger this is, the researchers from the University of Southern California, Cambridge and Politecnico di Torino delved into the kinds of

work that people engage in each day. Specifically, they looked at more than 10,000 tasks that are primarily computer-based and performed frequently.

They asked people in different professions to rate each how much meaning they derive from each of those tasks. The team also used an “AI Impact Index” to examine how likely each of those tasks is to be “exposed” to AI — that is, “current or near-term AI systems could plausibly perform or substantially speed up” the task.

“Worryingly, we find that tasks that workers associate with a sense of agency or happiness may be disproportionately exposed to AI,” Jaspreet Ranjit, Swabha Swayamdipta, Ke Zhou, and Daniele Quercia wrote in their study presented at the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

Remove the Repetitive, Protect the Purposeful

This is a phenomenon I watch out for in designing ways for my team to use AI. It’s also something I discuss with Nextiva’s clients as they adopt our AI-powered unified customer experience management (UCXM) platform to serve as the heart of their operations.

The goal is to have AI handle busywork so that humans can do things we do best: explore creative ideas, solve problems, and build real relationships. The kind of work that people often take special pride in.

My team designs our communication solutions to have AI handle rote tasks, while keeping humans “in the loop.” People are alerted when it’s time to jump in because a customer interaction requires more thought, complexity, and creative problem-solving. The more that technology like agentic AI and AI receptionists handle routine work and answer common questions, the more employees are free to engage in much more fulfilling experiences.

This new study notes the benefits of having AI handle routine CX tasks. “In customer support, for example, the use of generative AI systems is associated with roughly 14% higher productivity, on average, with increases of about 35% in the number of issues resolved per hour for less-experienced workers,” it says.

Fortunately, the study found that most tasks that involve building relationships and emotional awareness are less likely to be exposed to AI. What kinds of tasks are at risk? Often, “high-agency” ones that involve people’s specific, learned skills.

For example, art directors indicated that they want to create an initial layout or design rather than have an AI tool do so. Engineers said they prefer to come up with their own plans for experimental, environmental, or operational tests and prototypes. Sustainability officers made clear that they want to develop strategies to address energy use or resource conservation, rather than outsourcing that kind of development to an AI tool.

Break workflows into labeled stages — and let workers toggle AI on or off for each one.

THE STUDY'S DESIGN RECOMMENDATION

The Benefits Spiral

As an entrepreneur and business leader, I've long believed that when you enjoy what you do, you do it significantly better. That enjoyment also drives people to keep succeeding for the long term. As Steve Jobs put it, "If you're not having fun doing it, you don't really love it, you're going to give up."

When busywork is gone, employees begin solving problems that no one asked them to tackle. They notice new things, and develop ideas. The company itself changes.

And customers feel the difference. In what's known as "emotional contagion," customers pick up on how a company's employees feel about their work. The more satisfied the employee, the more satisfied the customer. They feed off of each other in a virtuous cycle.

Ultimately, the success of any business is determined by the kind of experience it provides for its customers. No one should feel demoralized. Everyone should feel valued, appreciated, and even joyful.

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