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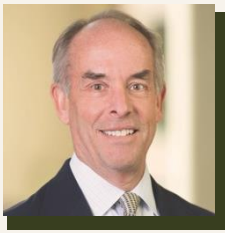
Americans Fear AI Will Hollow Out the Meaning of Work — and Threaten People's Sense of Well-Being

A survey of U.S. adults finds deep attachment to work as a source of purpose, identity and family responsibility, along with widespread concern about job loss, lower-quality work and diminished control.

By Lee Rainie and Janna Anderson

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The Place of Work in Human Lives

By Lee Rainie, director, Imagining the Digital Future Center, Elon University

People's work is deeply intertwined with their most essential sense of themselves: their identity, the meaning they find in life and their roles in their families and communities.

This new survey reveals a profound connection between paychecks and human purpose. As workers and other citizens consider the meaning and future of work in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), they make clear how much they believe is at stake. To Americans, the test of the AI economy will not be only how productive it becomes. It will be whether people can still find economically secure, socially valued and personally meaningful ways to contribute.

Their forecast is grim. An overwhelming 83% of Americans expect AI to eliminate more jobs than it creates. About two-thirds (68%) think most jobs will pay too little for folks to live a decent life, and 62% expect most of the available jobs to be dull and unfulfilling. Some 65% agree that if AI makes work less meaningful, people will lose their sense of purpose and dignity.

Yet this is not a land of Luddites. Most workers are already comfortable with AI at work or open to it with training, and half are highly confident they can

adapt their skills. What worries them is not learning the tools; it is losing control. Many believe AI's impact will be so great that most workers will have little say over their futures.

The survey shows that U.S. workers would welcome help preparing for the AI age, especially assistance that would lessen the chance that further advances in AI will overtake them. They generally favor training and guidance on AI's limits and on when human judgment should take priority; advice on which work roles are likely to grow or decline as AI advances; and support for strengthening the human skills that partner with AI.

However, they are not very confident that the people and institutions who might help them through the transition are up to the task. There are clear votes of no confidence in the capacity of government agencies and employers to aid those threatened by advances in AI.

In the end, these results point out an often-neglected major public-policy question that goes well beyond whether the AI economy creates enough jobs. The issue is whether the changing nature of work in the AI Age will create enough good human roles in the future.

The new social contract: Employment in a human-centered AI economy

Economically secure

Enough human work remains, and it pays enough for a decent life.

Publicly valued

Work that communities, employers and institutions recognize and support.

Personally meaningful

Work that still furnishes purpose, identity and dignity.

Key findings

Americans expect artificial intelligence (AI) to become central to working life, but they do not expect the transition to deliver broadly shared prosperity or greater human flourishing. Work remains deeply bound to people's sense of their family role, purpose and identity. Workers are willing to adapt, yet many doubt all workers will fare well. At the same time, 74% of workers believe they will have at least some control over what happens in *their own* careers in the coming wave of job change.

Work has deep personal meaning

81%

of workers say paid work is extremely or very important to their family role. **70%** say so of their meaning and purpose, **64%** of their identity and **58%** of their responsibility to community.

Americans expect a three-part decline

83%

of U.S. adults expect more jobs will be eliminated than created as AI spreads. **68%** expect jobs to pay too poorly for a decent lifestyle; **62%** expect dull and unfulfilling work.

The human stakes are high

65%

of U.S. adults say less meaningful work would erode people's purpose and dignity. **34%** say AI will make flourishing harder, vs. **26%** easier and **30%** equally easier and harder.

Workers are willing to adopt AI, but most expect weaker agency

66%

of workers say they are already comfortable with workplace AI or open to it with training. Half are highly confident they can adapt their skills. But **49%** say that most workers will have little control over their futures.

Pessimism about job loss is nearly universal across demographic groups. There are sharper divisions concerning worker readiness and the quality of the future. Adults aged 18-29 are especially likely to expect dull and unfulfilling work. College graduates are far more likely to say AI skills will be essential or very important (55% versus 39% for those with a high school education or less). In sum, the public shares a common expectation of disruption but expects people to enter the new world of work with unequal preparation and somewhat different fears.

Good work anchors family life, identity and purpose for jobholders

The prospect that AI will reduce the number of jobs has meaning beyond the possible loss of a paycheck. Paid work gives many people a fulfilling sense of their role in their family, a source of meaning, a personal identity and a way to meet obligations beyond themselves.

Percent of workers who say paid work is extremely or very important to their...



These findings suggest that the social meaning of work is widely shared, but there are some demographic differences. The importance of jobs in people's sense of their family roles is especially important to middle-aged workers.

Beyond the paycheck

52% of workers say paid work is **extremely** important to their family role, and **41%** say it is **extremely** important to their sense of meaning and purpose.

65% of adults agree that if AI makes work less meaningful, people will lose their sense of purpose and dignity.

62% expect most available jobs in an AI-shaped future to be dull and unfulfilling.

The fear: Fewer jobs, weaker pay, less fulfillment

Large majorities of all Americans anticipate a future with fewer human jobs, inadequate wages and less satisfying work. Together, those expectations describe a threat to the quantity, security and quality of employment.

QUANTITY

83%

expect more human jobs to be eliminated than created

17% expect more jobs created than eliminated

SECURITY

68%

expect most jobs will not pay enough to support a decent lifestyle

32% expect adequate pay

QUALITY

62%

expect most available jobs to be dull and unfulfilling

38% expect meaningful and fulfilling work

The public's expectation of net job loss is remarkably consistent across different groups. The differences become more pronounced when people judge job quality and pay. Democrats are more pessimistic than Republicans about pay (78% versus 57%), while Republicans are more likely than Democrats to expect jobs to be meaningful (47% versus 34%).

Even AI users are deeply worried about the future of human work

AI is already widely encountered and is expected to matter at work, yet significant shares of the public remain unconvinced that AI will improve human life. Current large language model (LLM) users are somewhat more optimistic than the public overall, but majorities still anticipate job loss, inadequate pay, unfulfilling work and threats to purpose and dignity.

65%

of American adults had used a large language model (LLM) like ChatGPT in the previous week; 35% had not

53%

of these LLM users say AI skills will be essential or very important for workers to succeed at their jobs in the next five years

Percent of large language model users who expect that...

More jobs will be eliminated than created

80%

Most jobs will pay too poorly to meet workers' needs for a decent lifestyle

65%

If AI makes work less meaningful, people will lose their sense of purpose and dignity

61%

Most jobs will be dull and unfulfilling

57%

AI users split three ways on whether human flourishing gets easier

Looking just at the 65% of the adult population who are LLM users, there is not much more optimism than among the full adult population. Familiarity with AI somewhat softens concern — but it does not erase it.

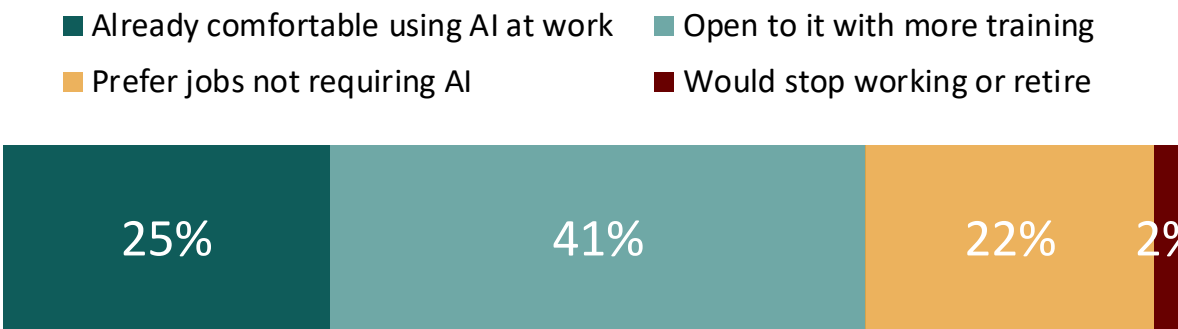
How AI users respond to the question, “Will AI make it easier or harder for people to flourish and live meaningful lives in five years?”



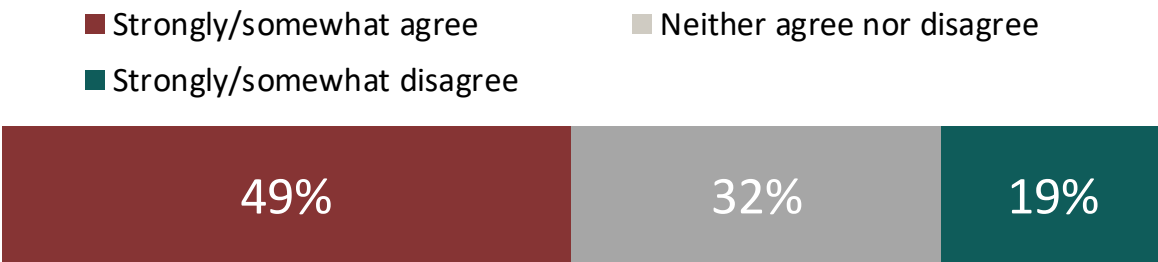
Workers are willing to adapt but less certain they will remain in control

Two-thirds of workers say they are already comfortable using AI or would use it with more training. Their confidence falls, however, as the question moves from learning new skills to retaining command over their careers.

Workers’ level of comfort with AI at work



Workers’ level of agreement to the assertion: “AI’s impact on the workforce is so great that most workers will have little control over their futures”



66%

of workers are already comfortable with AI at work or open to it with more training

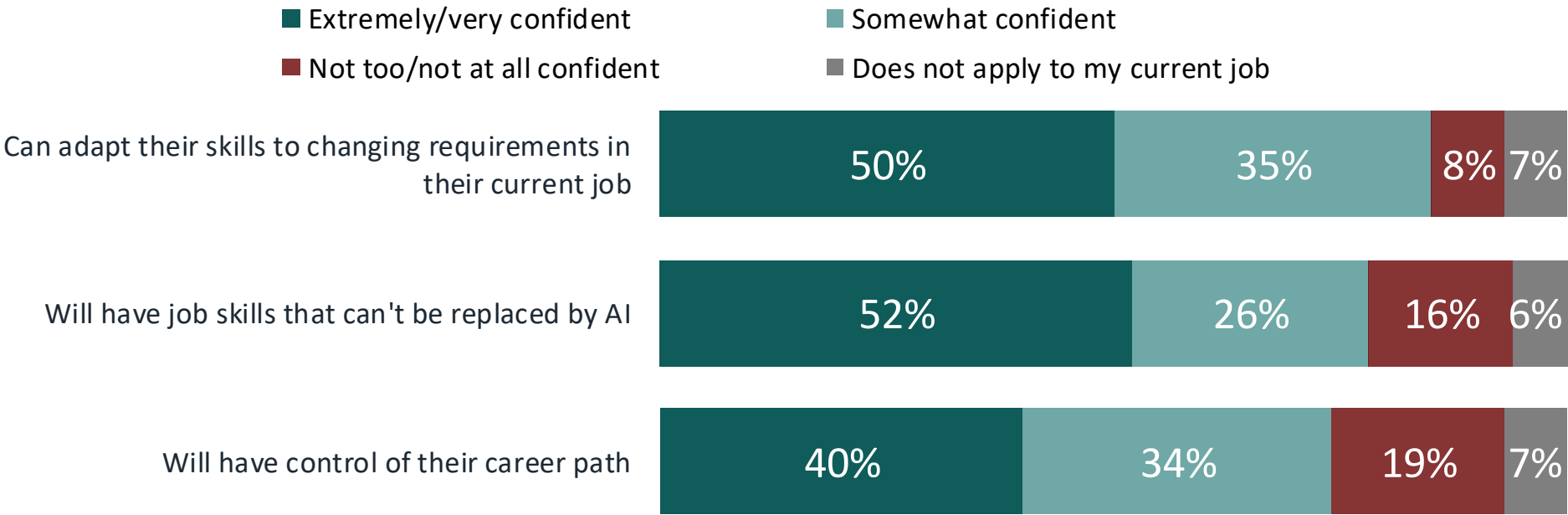
49%

of workers agree that most workers will have little control over their futures

Workers are willing to adapt but less certain they will remain in control

Most workers believe they can learn. Far fewer are certain that learning will allow them to direct their own careers. Only 8% say they lack confidence that they can adapt their current-job skills. That compares with 19% who say they lack confidence that they will control their career path.

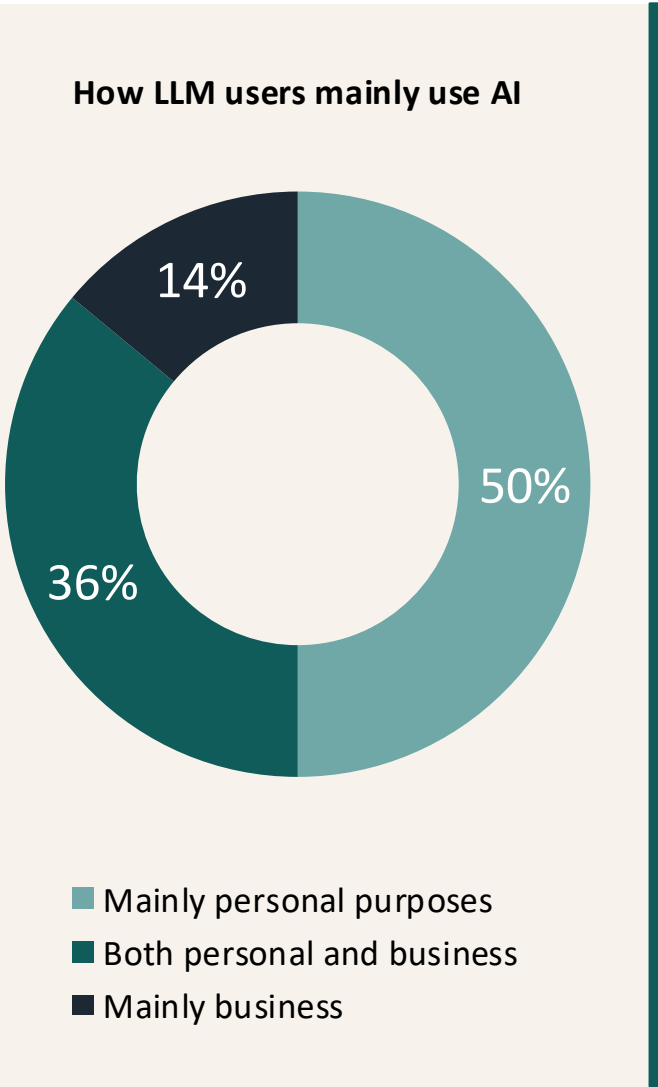
How confident workers are about their futures at work:



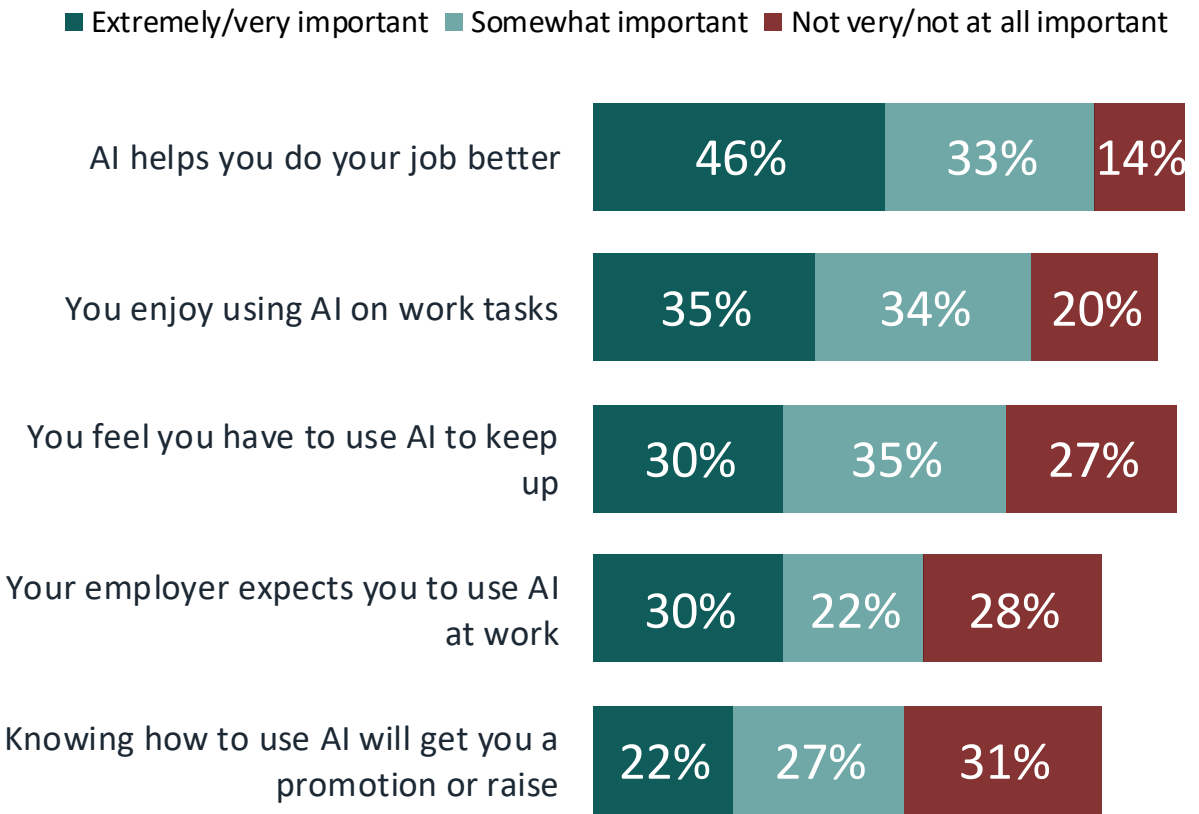
Workers’ feelings about their readiness are also not uniform. Workers in households earning at least \$100,000 are twice as likely as those under \$50,000 to say they are already comfortable with AI at work (34% versus 17%). College graduates are more comfortable than workers with a high school education or less (33% versus 18%).

Most LLM users say their AI use is personal, but work use is significant

People use AI at work for many reasons. Many say AI helps them do their job better. Many say they enjoy using AI on tasks. Meeting employer expectations and keeping up at work are also motivations. Hopes for a raise or promotion rank lower on the list.



Percent of the workers who use large language models at their jobs who cite these motivations for using AI on the job...

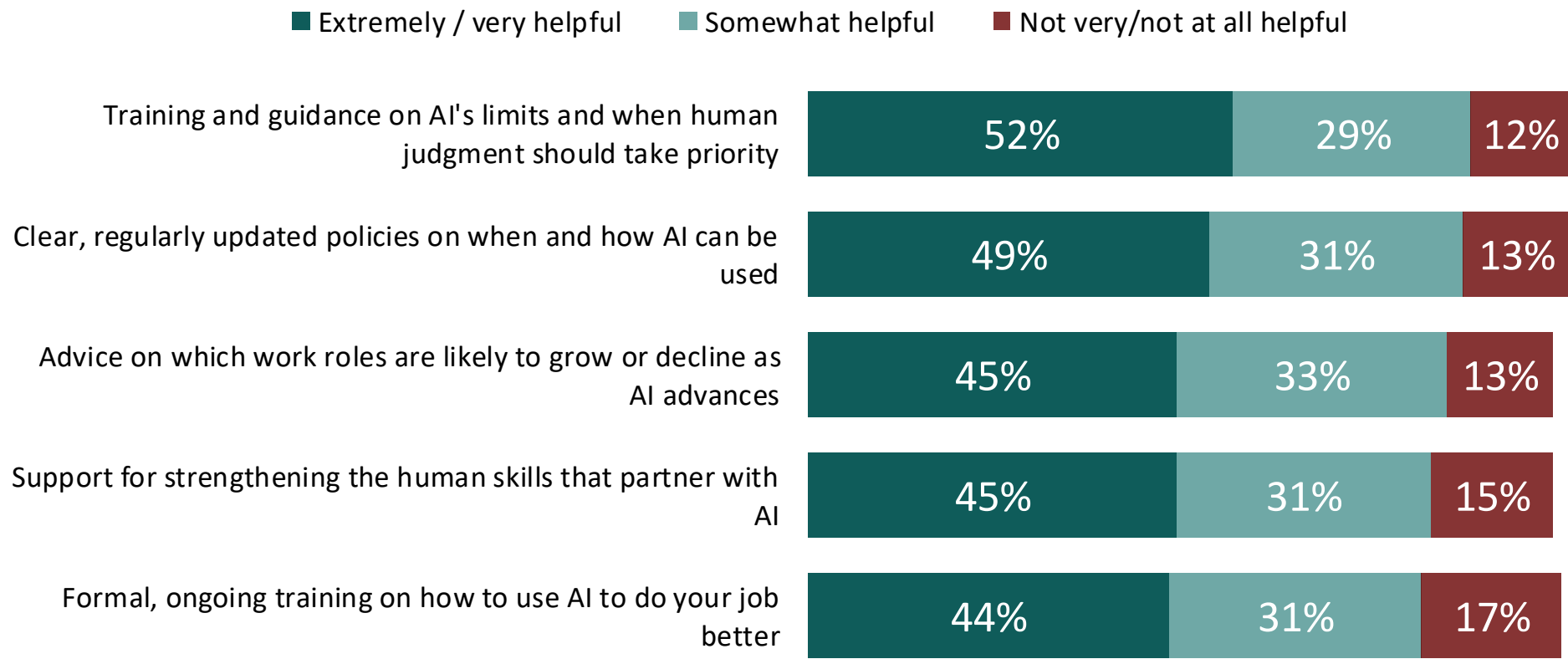


Workers want guidance about where AI ends and human judgment begins

Workers' leading request is not simply more software instruction. They want guidance about AI's limits, clear rules for its use, foresight about changing roles and help strengthening the human capabilities that complement machines.

Demand for training on AI's limits rises with age and education. 40% of workers ages 18 to 29 rate guidance on AI's limits as extremely or very helpful, compared with 60% of workers ages 50 and older. Support for training on AI's limits is also valued by 61% of college graduates versus 41% of workers with a high school education or less.

Percent of American workers who think these kinds of assistance would help them on the job



Americans imagine a new social contract in the AI Age: Self-reliance with shared responsibility

Americans do not appear to want workers protected from every change. Most say workers must adapt. At the same time, most say they expect that workers will have limited control, that loss of meaning threatens people's dignity and that AI-generated wealth should be widely shared. The public's position is reciprocal rather than purely individualistic.

SELF-RELIANCE

60%

of U.S. adults agree that workers must adapt themselves rather than expect outside help.

SHARED BENEFITS

59%

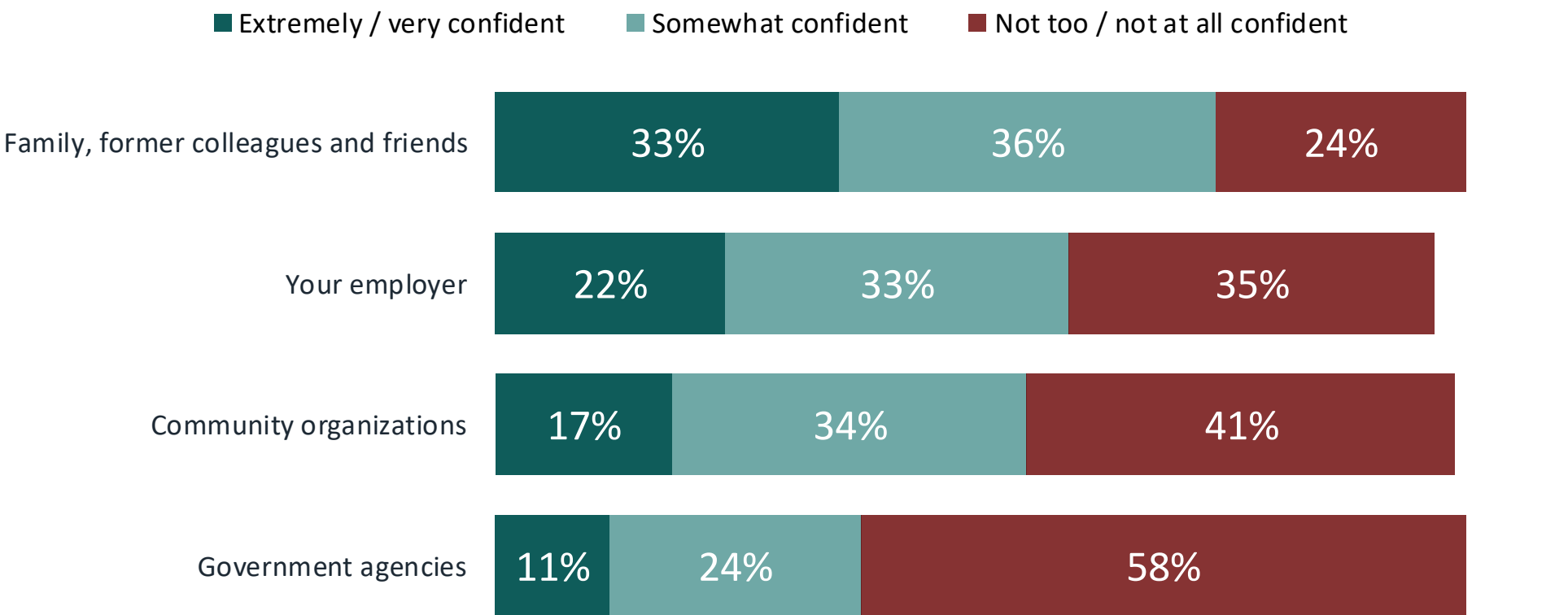
agree with the thought that the wealth generated by AI systems should be widely shared throughout society.

Age and party shape different parts of this bargain. Agreement that workers must adapt rises from 44% among adults ages 18 to 29 to 76% among those 65 and older. Support for widely sharing AI-generated wealth is far higher among Democrats than Republicans (76% versus 44%). Democrats are somewhat more likely than Republicans to say most workers will have little control (57% versus 45%). These combinations resist a simple ideological reading: personal responsibility, structural constraint and distributional fairness coexist in the public mind.

Workers are not highly confident they will get good support from some key actors in societal safety nets

We asked workers how confident they are that the following actors might provide support to them if advances in AI significantly affect their jobs in the next five years. They have mixed verdicts. They are most confident in their family, former colleagues and friends – that is, their social networks. They are least confident in government agencies.

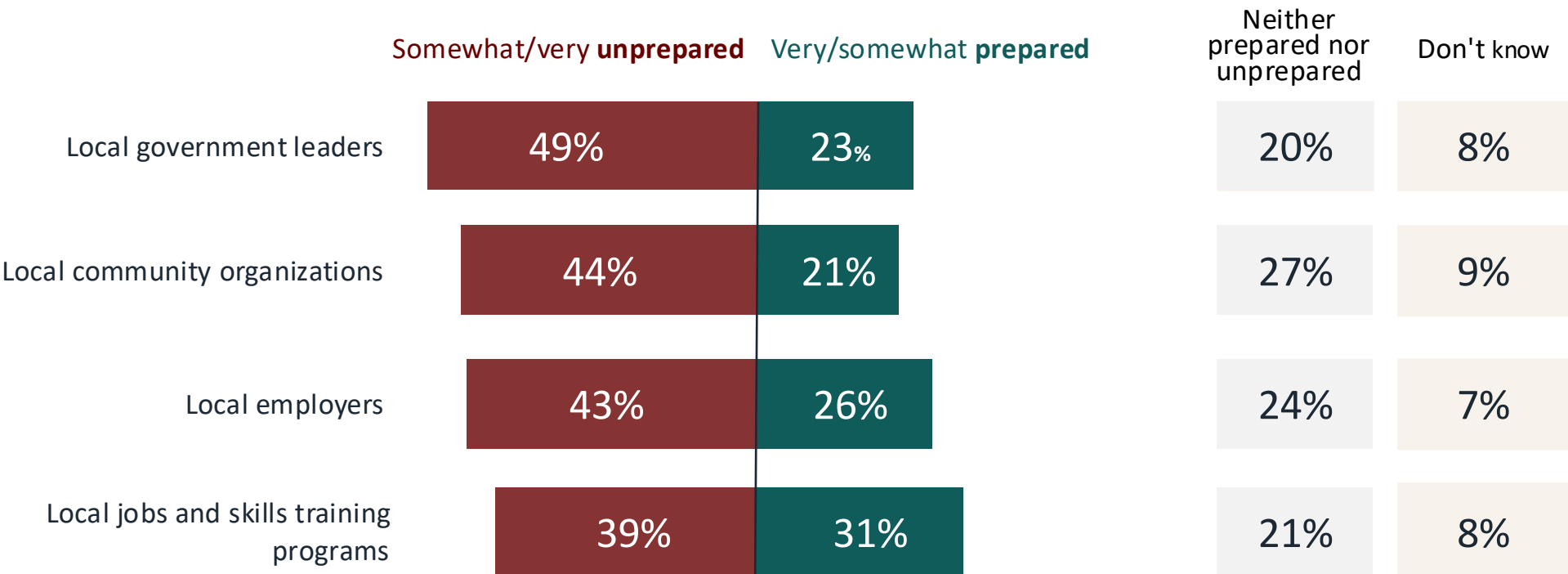
Among workers, confidence that these actors would provide support



Every local institution is rated more unprepared than prepared

The organizations expected to help communities absorb labor-market change do not look ready to the public. Among all American adults, jobs and skills programs receive the strongest assessment, yet even they are rated more unprepared than prepared. The preparedness deficit extends across employers, government and community organizations.

Percent of U.S. adults who say these groups have this level of preparedness for coming changes in the job market

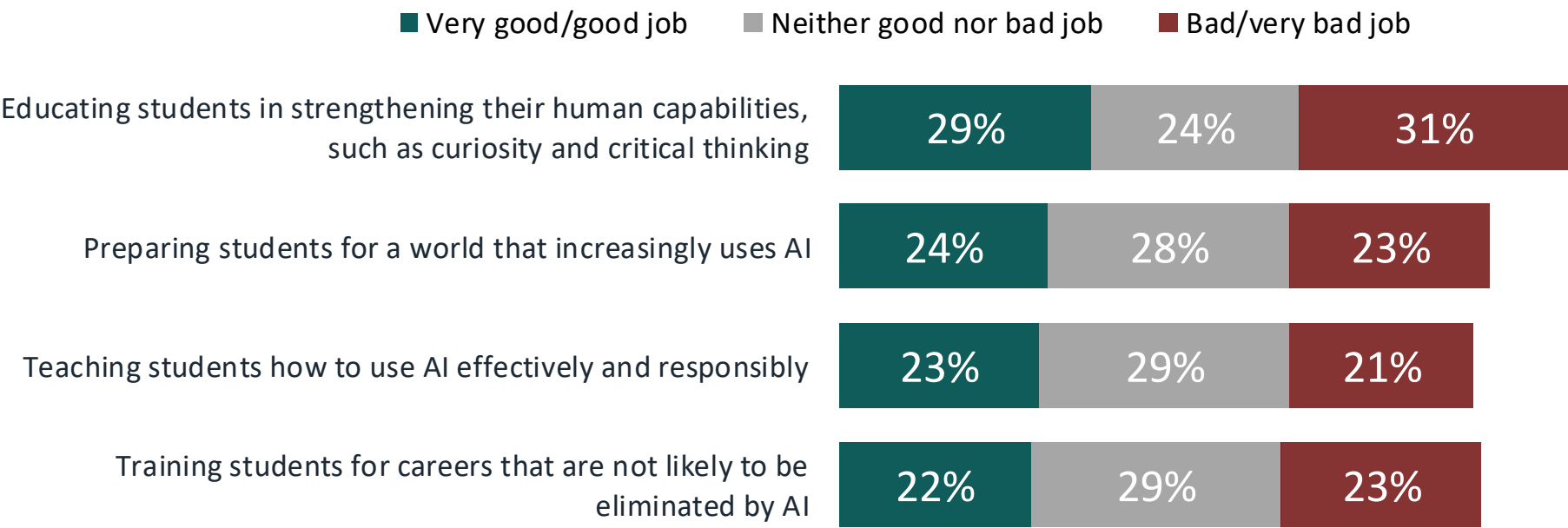


Americans’ perceptions differ sharply by social position. College graduates are more likely than those with a high school education or less to call every institution unprepared: 61% versus 40% for local government, 53% versus 35% for community organizations, 50% versus 36% for employers and 48% versus 32% for jobs programs. Black adults, by contrast, are more likely than White adults to see preparedness in local employers, government, community organizations and jobs programs.

Schools have not convinced the public they are preparing children for an AI future

Asked about the performance of their local K-12 schools on key aspects of learning tied to AI-related changes, Americans are split about whether schools are doing a good or bad job.

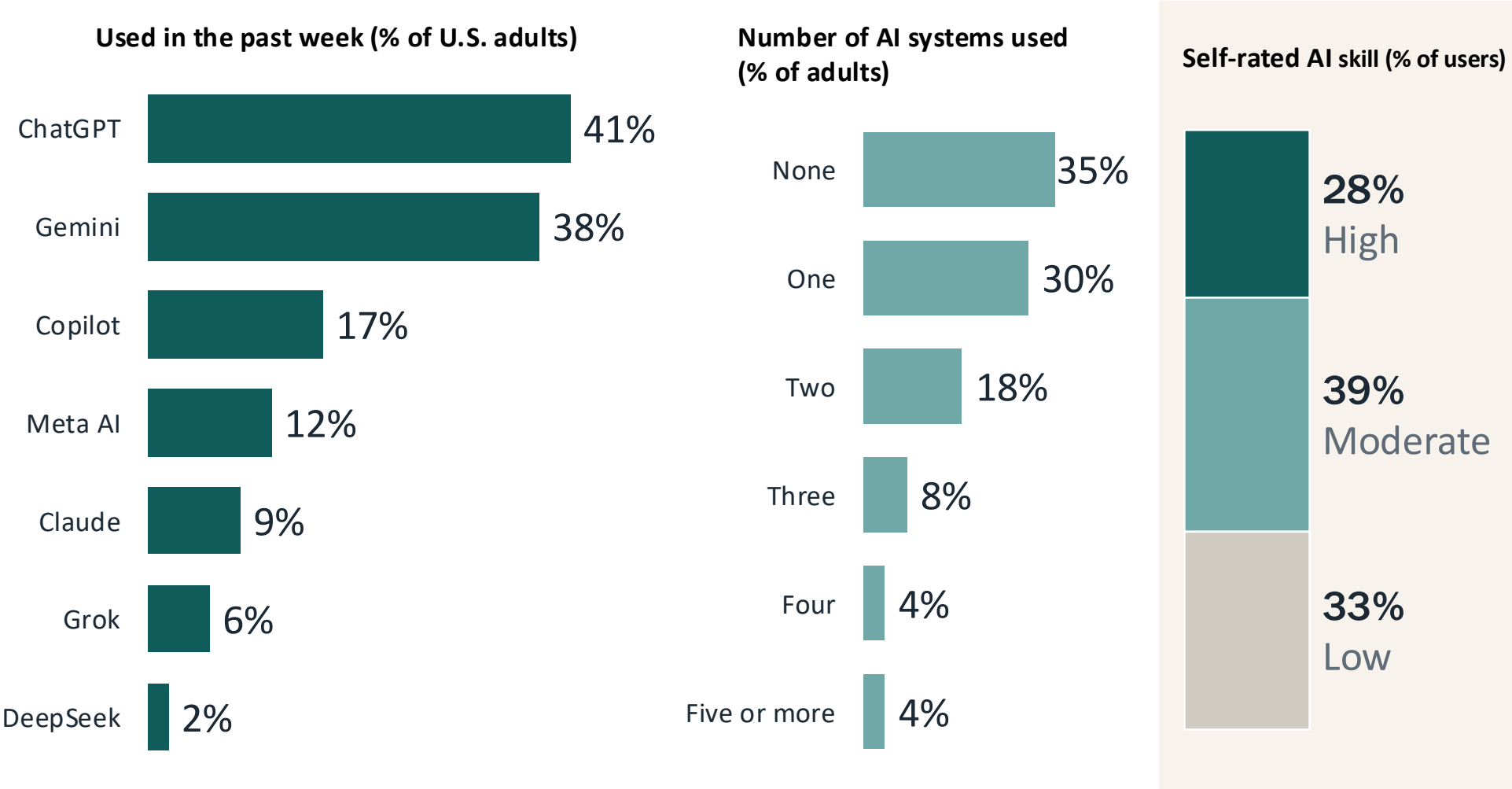
Percent of U.S. adults who say their local K-12 schools are doing a...



The strongest demographic divide on these issues is along racial and ethnic lines. Black and Hispanic adults are more likely than White adults to give schools positive ratings across all four tasks. For example, 43% of Black adults and 42% of Hispanic adults say schools do a good job strengthening curiosity and critical thinking, compared with 22% of White adults. Adults 65 and older are less positive than younger adults about those same activities and college graduates are more negative than those with high school educations or less.

Many Americans use LLMs; far fewer feel they've mastered them

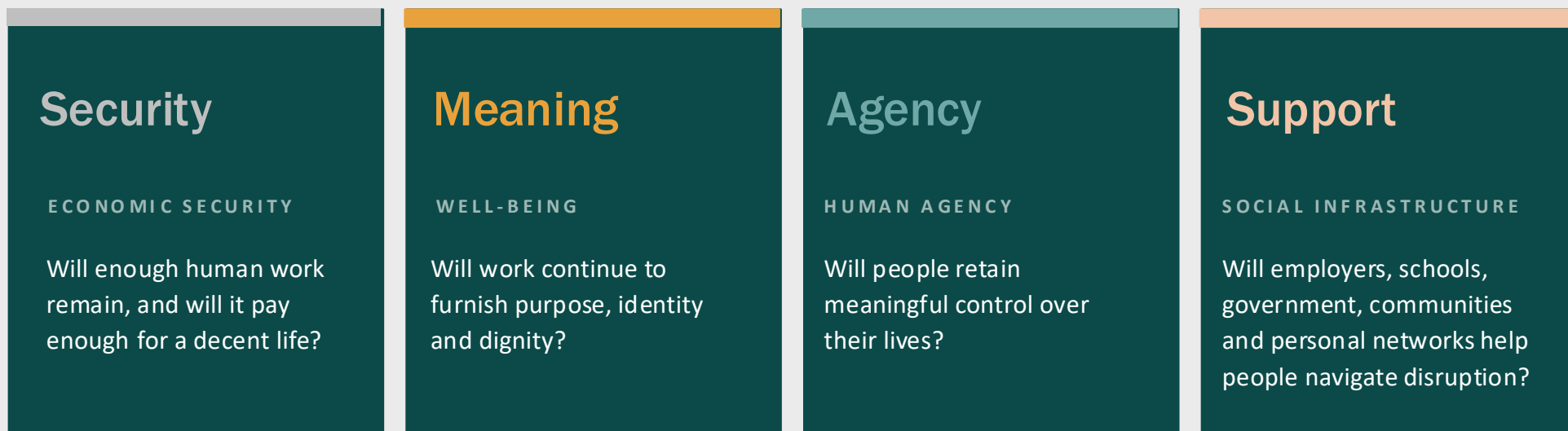
The survey captures a public already using multiple AI systems, but with very different levels of exposure and confidence. ChatGPT and Gemini dominate current use; a substantial minority uses several platforms; and only about one-quarter of users place themselves in the high-skill tier. AI use is widespread, but perceived mastery is not: only 28% of users place themselves in the high-skill category.



Overall, 65% used at least one system and 35% used none.

The defining challenge is the future of good work

Despite their well-documented concerns about an AI-suffused future, Americans generally do not reject AI outright. Most who use AI on the job have solid reasons for doing so, and most are willing to use the technology or learn how. Their deeper concern is that - as AI inevitably spreads in years to come - the changes that lie ahead may not preserve enough work or other life roles that provide economic security, social value, self identity, dignity and personal meaning and genuine human agency. The policy challenge is to support the transition in ways that make human satisfaction, agency and purpose feel consequential. The immediate imperative for employers, institutions and others who serve the public is to develop and support an AI Age infrastructure to support human resilience – [the vital factor enabling people to flourish](#).



The demographic findings reinforce these central challenges. Higher-income and college-educated workers are more likely to use AI, feel comfortable with it and believe they can adapt, yet they are more skeptical that institutions are prepared to help them navigate the future. Younger adults are relatively heavy adopters of AI, yet they are especially likely to anticipate unfulfilling work and many say they prefer jobs that do not require AI. Older adults place the strongest emphasis on self-reliance. And different racial and ethnic groups differ in their assessments of community responsibility, schools and local institutions.

How the survey was conducted

1,158

respondents, including an oversample of workers that brings the total sample of workers to 775 U.S. adults employed full- or part-time (“workers”)

±3.4

percentage-point margin of error for total respondents at the 95% confidence level

August 20–24,
2026

2026 data collection: web (n=1,128) and telephone (n=30); administered in English

The study. Conducted by SSRS on its Opinion Panel Omnibus platform — a national, twice-per-month, probability-based survey. All SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus data are weighted to represent the target population of U.S. adults ages 18 or older.

Recruitment. SSRS Opinion Panel members are recruited randomly based primarily on nationally representative ABS (Address Based Sample) design (including Hawaii and Alaska). ABS respondents are randomly sampled by Marketing Systems Group (MSG) through the U.S. Postal Service’s Computerized Delivery Sequence File (CDS), a regularly updated listing of all known addresses in the U.S. For the SSRS Opinion Panel, known business addresses are excluded from the sample frame. Additional panelists are recruited via random digit dial (RDD) telephone sample of cell phone numbers connected to a prepaid cell phone.

This sample is selected by MSG from the cell phone RDD frame using a flag that identifies prepaid numbers. Prepaid cell numbers are associated with cell phones that are “pay as you go” and do not require a contract. The SSRS Opinion Panel is a multi-mode panel (web and phone). Most panelists take self-administered web surveys. However, the option to take surveys conducted by a live telephone interviewer is available to those who do not use the internet as well as those who use the internet but are reluctant to take surveys online.

Notes about results. Because percentages are rounded, they may not total 100%. An asterisk (*) indicates values less than 0.5%. Verbiage in the topline reflects web wording; telephone wording may differ slightly due to interviewer-administered data collection. For more details about the methodology and topline findings, visit the report webpage.

A full rundown of the methodology and topline are available at: [LINK to ITDF webpage for this report](#).



Full methodology and topline findings on the Imagining the Digital Future website: [imaginingthedigitalfuture.org](https://www.imaginingthedigitalfuture.org)