

GUEST ESSAY

I'm a LinkedIn Executive. I See the Bottom Rung of the Career Ladder Breaking.

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There are growing signs that artificial intelligence poses a real threat to a substantial number of the jobs that normally serve as the first step for each new generation of young workers. Uncertainty around tariffs and global trade is likely to only accelerate that pressure, just as millions of 2025 graduates enter the work force.

We saw what happened in the 1980s when our manufacturing sector steeply declined. Now it is our office workers who are staring down the same kind of technological and economic disruption.

Breaking first is the bottom rung of the career ladder. In tech, advanced coding tools are creeping into the tasks of writing simple code and debugging — the ways junior developers gain experience. In law firms, junior paralegals and first-year associates who once cut their teeth on document review are handing weeks of work over to A.I. tools to complete in a matter of hours. And across retailers, A.I. chatbots and automated customer service tools are taking on duties once assigned to young associates.

These changes coincide with a shift appearing in the latest employment numbers. The unemployment rate for college grads has risen 30 percent since September 2022, compared with about 18 percent for all workers. And while LinkedIn's Workforce Confidence Index, a measure of job and career confidence across nearly 500,000 professionals, is hitting new lows amid general uncertainty, members of Generation Z are more pessimistic about their futures than any other age group out there. Meanwhile, in our recent survey of over 3,000 executives on LinkedIn at the vice

president level or higher, 63 percent agreed that A.I. will eventually take on some of the mundane tasks currently allocated to their entry-level employees.

Virtually all jobs will experience some impacts, but office jobs are expected to feel the biggest crunch: Our research suggests that professionals with more advanced degrees are more likely to see their jobs disrupted than those without. While the technology sector is feeling the first waves of change, reflecting A.I.'s mass adoption in this field, the erosion of traditional entry-level tasks is expected to play out in fields like finance, travel, food and professional services, too.

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Companies are not doing away with these jobs overnight. And we haven't yet seen definitive evidence that A.I. is the reason for the shaky entry-level job market; economic uncertainty plays a major role. Eventually, A.I. will create plenty of jobs. The World Economic Forum predicts that number could be as high as 78 million more jobs, even after predicted job losses. In our survey, executives on LinkedIn still believe that entry-level employees bring fresh ideas and new thinking that is valuable to their businesses.

But any change to young workers' job fortunes hits them at a particularly vulnerable time; getting a late start can slow down workers' careers for decades. The Center for American Progress found that young adults who experience six months of unemployment at age 22 can expect to earn approximately \$22,000 less over the next decade.

Also concerning is the potential for widening inequality in the job market. If entry-level roles evaporate, those lacking elite networks or privileged backgrounds will face even steeper barriers to finding their footing in the workplace. Plus, the fallout from large-scale economic shifts ripples through entire communities. When manufacturing jobs vanished across America's heartland, the result wasn't just lost income but also social and political upheaval.

To fix entry-level work, we'll have to reimagine it entirely.

First, we need to ensure workers are learning the skills employers are starting to demand. New approaches are emerging: American University's Kogod School of Business is embedding A.I. across its curriculum and training faculty members to use A.I. tools, and Carnegie Mellon is offering an A.I. bachelor's program in which students take classes on harnessing the power of A.I. to be "beneficial and useful for people."

Community colleges in Miami-Dade, Houston and Maricopa Community Colleges are joining in, starting a national A.I. consortium to align curriculums with work force needs and offer applied A.I. degrees backed by companies like Intel and Microsoft.

Unless employers want to find themselves without enough people to fill leadership posts down the road, they need to continue to hire young workers. But they need to redesign entry-level jobs that give workers higher-level tasks that add value beyond what can be produced by A.I. At the accounting and consulting firm KPMG, recent graduates are now handling tax assignments that used to be reserved for employees with three or more years of experience, thanks to A.I. tools. And at Macfarlanes, early-career lawyers are now tasked with interpreting complex contracts that once fell to their more seasoned colleagues. Research from the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management backs up this switch, indicating that new and low-skilled workers see the biggest productivity gains and benefits from working alongside A.I. tools.

This is a group eager to grow. LinkedIn research finds that 40 percent of Gen Z job candidates say they would be willing to switch jobs and even take a 2 to 5 percent pay cut if they were given more opportunities to advance.

For generations, entry-level positions have served as professional steppingstones where new graduates could safely learn under the watchful eye of seasoned managers. Now that the model is unraveling, we must push to rebuild it to reflect the world of work we live in and redesign first jobs with growth in mind — roles that teach adaptability, not repetition, and serve as springboards, not stalls.

Fixing entry-level work is the first step to fixing all work. Because all our jobs are going to come up against this same wave of change sooner or later. It will feel slow, until it's sudden. We know there's a generation of talent waiting in the wings for their big break. The question is whether we'll give them a real chance to begin.

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