



The Changing Face of Workforce Uncertainty

What 14 Waves of Research Reveal About AI, Economic Pressure
and the Changing Meaning of Job Security

A joint publication by RONIN International and myCLEARopinion Insights Hub

Insights from the Workforce Confidence Survey (June 2025–September 2026)

About This Study

The **Workforce Confidence Survey** is a multi-wave quantitative tracking study conducted collaboratively by [RONIN International](#) and [myCLEARopinion Insights Hub](#). The survey tracks the experiences, expectations and concerns of U.S. workers across industries.

This analysis examines 9,171 responses collected across 14 survey waves from June 2025 through September 2026. Respondents were asked:

“Please indicate what your number one concern is regarding your current role. (Please be as specific as possible.)”
Respondents could also select “No concerns” if they did not have any current concerns.

Blank responses in the analysis file represent respondents reporting no current concerns.

The analysis combines overall response incidence with thematic analysis of the verbatim responses. AI and automation figures reflect direct references to artificial intelligence, AI, automation and closely related terminology in respondents’ answers. Responses could contain more than one idea or concern.

Because open-ended questions capture what respondents volunteer without being presented with a predefined list, percentages should be interpreted as the share who spontaneously mentioned a topic, rather than the total share of workers who may hold that concern.

Results describe patterns within survey respondents and should not be interpreted as estimates of all U.S. workers unless otherwise specified by the broader survey methodology.

The Changing Nature of Workforce Concern

For more than a year, workers have been telling us, in their own words, what concerns them most about their current roles. Across 14 waves from June 2025 through September 2026, 9,171 respondents were given the opportunity to identify their number one concern or select “No concerns” if they had none.

**Workers are not necessarily becoming more concerned.
What they are concerned about is changing.**

71.2%

2025

*Respondents identifying a concern
Wave range: 67.9%–76.6%*

71.0%

2026

*Respondents identifying a concern
Wave range: 68.7%–72.9%*

The level of concern has remained relatively stable. The composition of that concern has not.

Individual waves fluctuated, but there is no sustained upward trajectory suggesting workers simply became progressively more concerned. Beneath that stability, however, the nature of workforce uncertainty has been evolving. Economic conditions, government policies and regulations, rising costs, staffing challenges, company leadership and job security appear throughout the research. At the same time, artificial intelligence has become an increasingly visible part of the conversation.

From Replacement to Adaptation

AI was already on workers' minds when the research began. Respondents were talking about automation, technological disruption and the possibility of AI replacing human work in June 2025.

But over the following 15 months, AI became more prominent in the responses. More importantly, the way workers talked about it began to change.

THE EARLY QUESTION:

Could AI replace me?

OVER TIME, THE QUESTIONS BECAME MORE COMPLICATED:

Will my employer decide AI can replace me?

Will companies reduce staff because they believe AI can fill the gap?

Is leadership implementing the technology thoughtfully?

How do I learn to work with AI so I remain valuable?

The evolution of those responses points to something larger than concern about a single technology. Today's workforce is navigating multiple sources of uncertainty at the same time. Technology, economic pressure and organizational decision-making are becoming increasingly intertwined, changing not only what workers worry about, but how they think about their own value and security at work.

AI Moves Further Into the Workforce Conversation

AI was never absent from the research. Its prominence fluctuated across waves, rather than rising steadily month after month. The longer trend, however, shows that AI became a more prominent recurring workforce issue.

SHARE SPONTANEOUSLY MENTIONING AI OR AUTOMATION

~7%

2025 waves

~11%

2026 waves

13.8%

March 2026

13.9%

May 2026

10.6%

September 2026

In the 2025 waves, roughly 7% of respondents directly mentioned AI or automation, compared with approximately 11% from January through September 2026. References peaked at 13.8% in March and 13.9% in May 2026. By September, 10.6% were still mentioning AI without being prompted.

**These are unprompted responses to an open-ended question about workers' number one concern, not selections from a predefined list.*

AI had to be important enough to come to mind on its own.

The First AI Question: Could It Do My Job?

Some of the earliest AI comments are striking in their simplicity. In June 2025, one respondent wrote: *“AI has the ability to do my job without much human input.”*

Another was concerned about: *“Being able to outsource my work to cheaper labor such as to interns or artificial intelligence.”*

Others simply wrote “AI” or described automation taking over tasks they currently perform.

These responses capture one of the earliest and most persistent ways workers have understood AI's potential impact: substitution.

If a technology can perform the work, what happens to the worker?

But even in the earliest wave, the responses show that workers were thinking about more than direct replacement.

One respondent worried that newer owners and production facilities would rely on AI rather than an experienced quality assurance director, noting that important insights come from directly observing processes and may not be accurately duplicated by AI.

Another described the broader issue as technological disruption, anticipating that the way people work would continue to evolve rapidly as AI adoption increased.

“AI has the ability to do my job without much human input.”

The concern was not simply that AI existed. It was what organizations might decide to do with it.

From Technology Risk to Employment Risk

By fall 2025, that connection becomes more explicit.

In September, one respondent reported: “*My position was outsourced to AI and India, quality optional.*” Another worried that responsibilities would eventually be outsourced to AI or eliminated.

By October, AI references had increased to 10.2% of respondents, and the language frequently connected the technology directly with redundancy, labor costs and changing staffing needs.

One respondent wrote: “*AI may make my role redundant.*”

Another described: “*AI and technology replacing need for human services and requiring need to adjust to a lower price, more competitive environment.*”

Another was concerned about the pressure to reduce labor costs while integrating AI into the organization: “*There is a demand to bring labor costs down, but integrating AI can be a huge mess if not done thoughtfully and intentionally.*” The distinction is subtle but important. The question is no longer only whether AI is technically capable of performing a task.

Workers are increasingly thinking about how employers will interpret that capability and how those interpretations could affect staffing, compensation and organizational structure.

“There is a demand to bring labor costs down, but integrating AI can be a huge mess if not done thoughtfully and intentionally.”

By 2026, the AI Conversation Becomes More Complicated

AI references became more frequent during the first half of 2026. They increased from 8.7% in January to 10.4% in February and 13.8% in March.

In March, respondents described “*AI and automation replacing people*,” “*AI systems replacing IT workers and other industry workforces*” and the potential for AI-driven automation to eliminate some types of knowledge-worker roles.

But another theme begins to become more visible alongside replacement. **Workers start talking about how AI is being managed.** One February respondent's entire concern was “*Poorly managed AI implementation.*” That short response captures an important evolution in the data. The perceived risk is not necessarily the technology alone. It is the decisions organizations make around the technology. That idea becomes even more visible in May, when AI and automation mentions reached 13.9%, the highest level recorded in the study period.

One respondent said “*The threat of AI significantly changing not only my role but my entire department's role. I would also include the expectation that AI can solve problems that it may not be suited to. I am a big AI proponent, but have serious trust issues in its current state.*”

Another wrote: “*Jobs will be cut due to the usage of AI. The bosses are already using it, getting incorrect information, and still think this will replace workers. There is no critical thinking.*” And another identified “*Proper, error managed implementation of AI.*”

“Poorly managed AI implementation.”

These are not simply anti-technology responses. In some cases, the respondents explicitly recognize the usefulness or potential of AI.

Their concern is whether organizations understand its limitations and whether decisions about people are being made faster than organizations understand the technology itself.

The Question Begins to Shift: How Do I Remain Valuable?

Not every AI-related response is about resisting the technology. By mid-2026, some workers were beginning to frame the issue in terms of adaptation.

A June respondent described the concern this way: “*AI implications for my fellow workers and how I best incorporate it to make me a stronger worker.*”

That is a fundamentally different expression of workforce uncertainty. The worker is no longer asking only whether AI threatens the job. The worker is asking how to work alongside it.

This does not mean concerns about displacement have disappeared. Far from it. Throughout the summer, respondents continue to mention job loss, automation and AI replacing work.

But the coexistence of replacement concerns and adaptation concerns suggests that **the workforce conversation is maturing.** As AI becomes part of everyday organizational life, workers are increasingly thinking about how their roles may change, where their expertise will continue to provide value and what they need to do to adapt.

These considerations have implications well beyond technology adoption. They affect training, professional development, recruitment, retention and the relationship employees have with organizational leadership.

Which skills remain valuable?

Which tasks will change?

Where can human experience add value?

How quickly must workers adapt?

When Leadership Becomes the AI Concern

One of the most revealing responses in the entire 14-wave period came in August 2026. A respondent wrote *“I do not believe that AI technologies (particularly AI agents) will be able to effectively replace me or people like me in the foreseeable future. However, I am concerned that executive leadership at my company may believe that they are able to do so and may make staffing decisions based on that belief.”*

That distinction may be one of the most important findings contained in the open-ended research. **For some workers, confidence in their own ability is not the issue.** They may believe their expertise remains valuable. They may believe AI cannot fully replicate their work. They may even be comfortable using AI themselves. **What they do not necessarily trust is how others will evaluate the technology.**

Another August respondent similarly worried that businesses were relying too heavily on AI and replacing experienced workers while overlooking mistakes and eliminating institutional knowledge.

A food safety respondent expressed concern that AI could be used to produce programs that are inaccurate or do not reflect what a company actually does.

Another expected AI to increase rather than decrease workload because experienced workers would still be needed to train, review and provide input. Together, these responses complicate the familiar “AI versus workers” narrative.

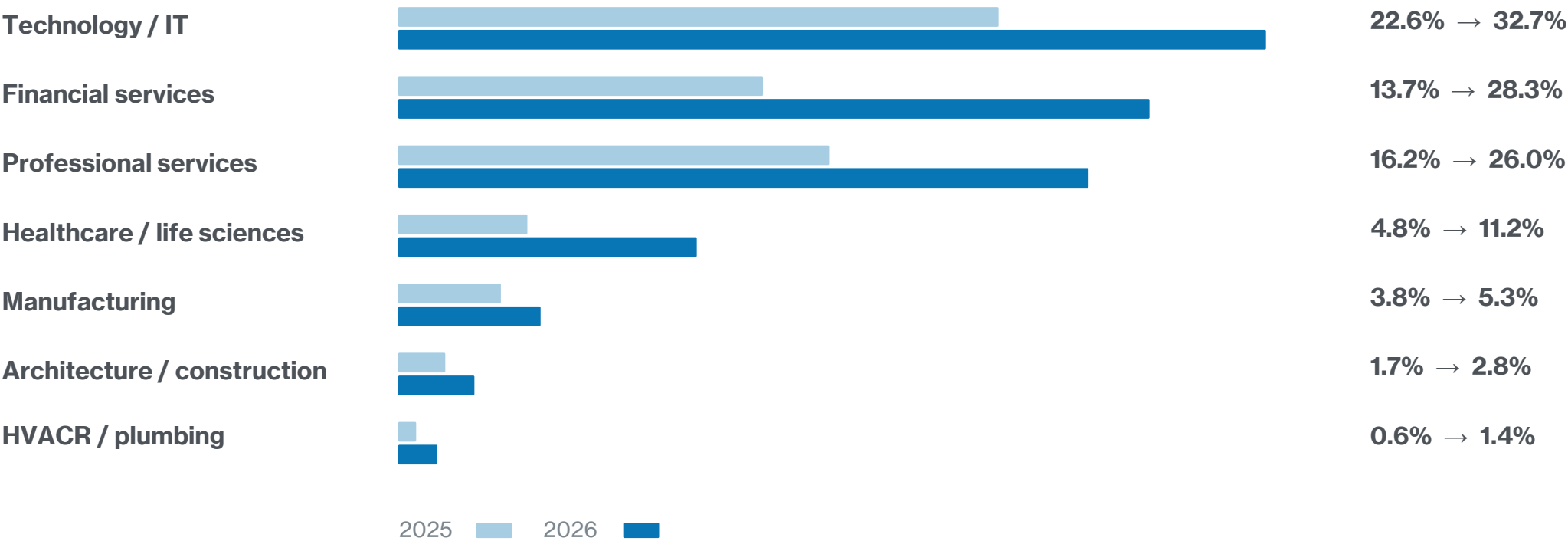
The perceived tension is sometimes between experience and efficiency, between expert judgment and automated output, or between what a technology can do and what decision-makers believe it can do.

“I do not believe that AI technologies (particularly AI agents) will be able to effectively replace me or people like me in the foreseeable future. However, I am concerned that executive leadership at my company may believe that they are able to do so and may make staffing decisions based on that belief.”

There Is No Single AI Workforce Experience

The overall trend masks substantial differences by industry. AI and automation are more prominent in the responses of workers in some sectors than others.

DIRECT AI / AUTOMATION MENTIONS BY INDUSTRY:



Technology is not reshaping workforce concern at the same speed or in the same way for everyone.

AI Is Only Part of the Story

It would be tempting to look at the growth in AI references and conclude that technology has become the defining workforce concern.

The responses do not support such a simple conclusion.

Throughout the 14 waves, workers continue to talk about economic conditions, inflation and rising costs, government policy and regulation, budgets, company performance, staffing, workload, management, career opportunities and job security. **And these concerns frequently overlap.**

A worker may be concerned about AI because a company is under pressure to reduce costs. Another may worry about layoffs because sales are slowing. Someone else may be concerned about tariffs or inflation because higher costs are affecting customers and, in turn, demand for the company's products or services. Still another may connect AI adoption with a broader lack of confidence in company leadership.

By September 2026, one respondent summarized the convergence bluntly: *“Just one? Not sure I can limit to just one. AI, economy, current administration, CEO’s incompetence. The economy is the most concerning currently, AI close second.”*

The response highlights a limitation of asking people to name a single concern, but it also reveals something about the reality workers are experiencing. **Their concerns do not exist in isolation.**

“Just one? Not sure I can limit to just one. AI, economy, current administration, CEO’s incompetence. The economy is the most concerning currently, AI close second.”

Workforce Uncertainty Is Becoming Layered

That may ultimately be the larger story in these 14 waves. A worker can feel secure in their abilities but uncertain about company leadership. They can believe AI is useful while worrying about how it will be implemented or feel confident in their current position while questioning the economic conditions surrounding their company. They may also be willing to learn new technology but uncertain whether their employer will give them the opportunity to adapt. And they can experience several of these concerns at the same time.

That creates a different kind of workforce uncertainty. It is less about one identifiable threat and more about the interaction among technology, economic pressure, organizational decisions and individual adaptability. The open-ended responses suggest that workers are increasingly trying to understand where they fit within that changing environment.

For employers, this presents a challenge. Introducing new technology is not simply an operational decision. Workers are watching what those investments signal about staffing, expertise and the future value of their roles. Similarly, cost-cutting is not viewed only through a financial lens. Employees connect it with workload, job security and the likelihood that technology will be used to replace rather than support them.

And training is no longer only about teaching someone how to use a new tool. It is also about helping workers understand how their skills and experience will continue to have value as their roles evolve.

It can become part of the answer to a much larger question:

Will there still be a place for my expertise as the way we work changes?

What Workers Appear to Be Asking of Employers

The open-ended responses were not designed as a list of recommendations for employers and should not be interpreted as one. Taken together, they point toward several questions organizations may need to answer more clearly.

01 What is AI intended to do?

Workers may react differently to technology designed to support their work than to technology introduced primarily to reduce headcount. Clarity matters.

02 Where does human expertise remain essential?

Experience, context, judgment and institutional knowledge need to be recognized alongside what can be automated.

03 How will existing workers participate?

Training and adaptation can be part of the implementation process rather than left for workers to navigate alone.

04 Do workers trust decision-makers?

Employees evaluate whether leaders understand AI, recognize its limitations and make thoughtful staffing decisions.

The workforce AI challenge may be as much about leadership and communication as it is about technology.

The Story Is Still Being Written

Fourteen waves of workforce research do not tell us exactly where work is headed, but they do show us how workers are experiencing the transition.

From June 2025 through September 2026, the overall incidence of workforce concern remained remarkably stable. However, AI became more prominent in workers' unprompted concerns, and the language surrounding it expanded from direct fears of replacement to questions about implementation, leadership, expertise and adaptation. At the same time, economic pressure, organizational uncertainty and other longstanding workforce concerns did not disappear. **Instead, these concerns are increasingly intersecting.**

That may be the most important evolution of all. **The workforce is not simply asking whether AI will take jobs.** Workers are asking what their jobs will become, whether their employers will continue to value their expertise, whether leadership will make good decisions about emerging technology, and what they themselves must do to remain valuable as work changes.

These are questions about AI, but they are also questions about confidence. As the workplace continues to evolve, the answers organizations provide may matter just as much as the technology itself.

Stability at the topline should not be mistaken for stability underneath it.

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