

THE STATE OF AI AT WORK



Leaders think their AI rollouts are working. The data says the workforce never left the starting line. A field reading of where proficiency stands in 2026, and the mandate to close the gap.

87%

use AI at a beginner level, or not at all

29%

of organizations see real ROI from AI

13%

have crossed into real, value-generating use

Work is for **bots**.
Life is for **humans**.

INSIDE THIS REPORT

Contents

01	Foreword KRISTIAN KABASHI ON THE NEW BAR	p. 03
02	Executive summary THE STATE OF AI AT WORK, IN SIX NUMBERS	p. 04
03	Using AI, not effectively THE PROFICIENCY LANDSCAPE	p. 05
04	The use-case desert WHY ADOPTION STALLS	p. 06
05	Use cases that won't pay WHAT PEOPLE ACTUALLY DO WITH AI	p. 07
06	The time-savings gap WHAT AI IS REALLY RETURNING	p. 08
07	Investing, not closing SPEND IS UP, PROFICIENCY ISN'T	p. 09
08	The perception gap EXECUTIVES VS THE FLOOR	p. 10
09	Individual contributors THE PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND	p. 11
10	Industries LEADERS AND LAGGARDS	p. 12
11	Functions WHERE THE WORK IS, AND ISN'T	p. 13
12	The 2026 mandate THE FRAMEWORK, AS A TO-DO LIST	p. 14
13	The engine HOW THE GAP GETS CLOSED	p. 15

HOW WE READ THE FIELD

A synthesis of 2026's largest workforce and enterprise AI studies, scored across five dimensions. Most measurement stops at the first. The value lives in the other four.

1 AI Knowledge

How AI works, where it fails, how to use it without leaking data.

2 AI Usage

Frequency, depth and breadth. On what, and how far in.

3 AI Skill

Spotting a use case and executing it. Judged on output, not self-report.

4 AI Attitudes

Trust, excitement, anxiety. What decides if a tool survives week two.

5 Org Readiness

Strategy, policy, access, manager expectation. The system people land in.

FOREWORD

**Kristian Kabashi**FOUNDER · THE BLANK COLLAR
COINED 2016 · SIX YEARS BEFORE CHATGPT

The bar for AI proficiency keeps rising. The workforce is stuck at the starting line.

In 2025, AI proficiency meant something basic. Can your people open a chatbot, write a half decent prompt, and not paste the customer list into it. Companies spent a year teaching exactly that, and it worked. Employees now know what AI is and how to summarize an email with it.

That was the floor, not the ceiling. In 2026 proficiency means something harder. Putting AI inside real, value generating work every single week. That is the gap every company has to cross to turn AI spend into AI return, and almost nobody has crossed it.

Work is for **bots**. But first the work actually has to move to the bots.

Which explains the paradox. ChatGPT passed a billion users and roughly three in four employees now touch AI at work, yet most of that use stays shallow and only about **29% of organizations report meaningful return**. The tools went everywhere. The value did not follow.

Worse, leadership cannot see it. Executives report a clear strategy and broad adoption. The people doing the work report something quieter and far less finished. This report is the truth serum, and the mandate to get your people over the new bar before it rises again.

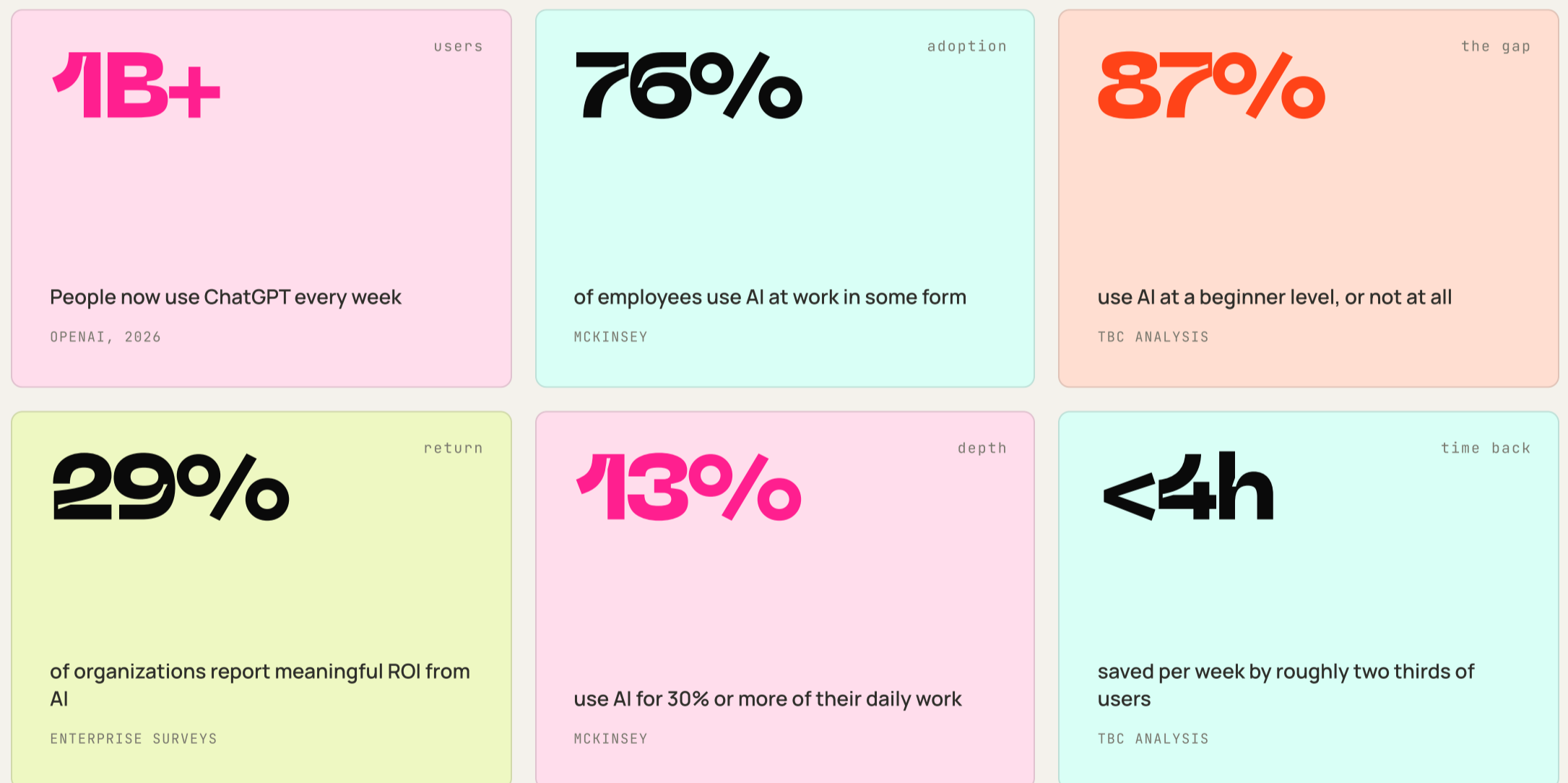
Kristian Kabashi

FOUNDER, THE BLANK COLLAR · ZÜRICH · JUNE 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state of AI at work, in six numbers

Adoption is no longer the story. Depth is. Every chart in this report points to the same gap: AI is everywhere, and almost nowhere is it doing valuable work.



The gap

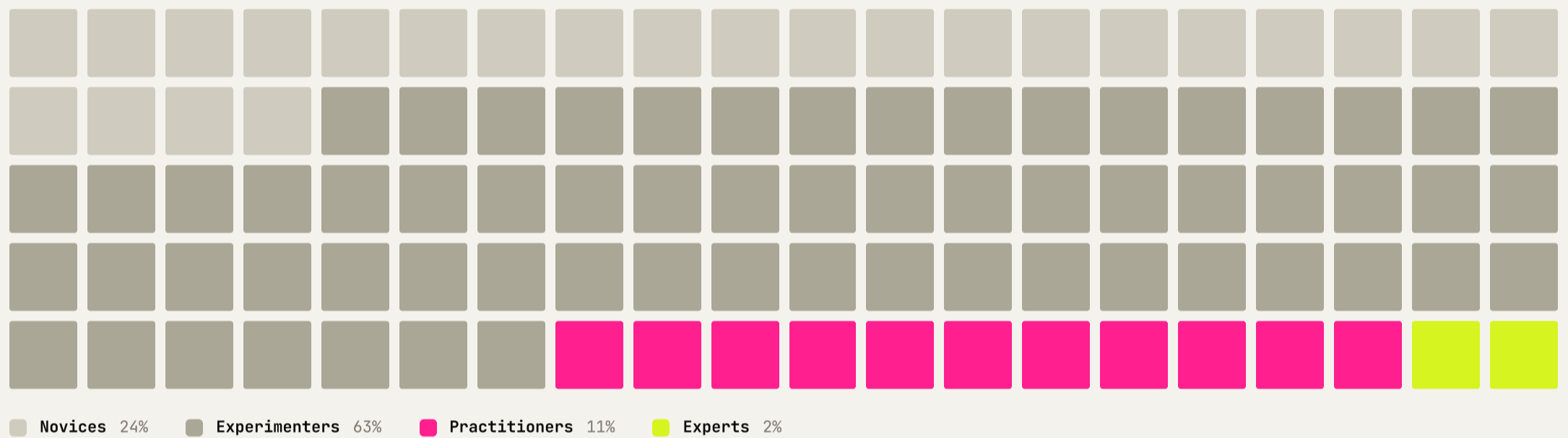
Between the 76% who use AI and the 13% who use it for real work sits the entire opportunity. Closing it is worth more than any tool you will buy this year.

KEY FINDING 01 OF 09



People are using AI. Just not effectively.

Adoption is no longer the problem. Roughly three in four employees now use AI in some form, and more cross from never-tried to experimenting every month. Almost nobody moves past the experimenter line into work that pays for itself. Each square below is 1% of the workforce. Only the pink and lime ones, about **13%**, have crossed into real, value-generating use.



24%
Novices
Tried it and bounced off, or never started at all.

63%
Experimenters
Summaries, rewrites, quick answers. Shallow by default.

11%
Practitioners
AI wired into real workflows. Feels the productivity.

2%
Experts
Builds automations and agents. Changes the job.

WHAT IT MEANS Experimenters summarize. Practitioners ship. The whole report is about the distance between those two squares, and how few people have crossed it.

KEY FINDING 02 OF 09



Everyone is standing in a use-case desert.

What blocks proficiency is not prompting. People learn that in an afternoon. They get stuck one step earlier, on a blank question: **what do I even point this at?** They open the tool, summarize one email, and bounce, because nothing in the actual job comes pre-labeled give this to AI.

85%

have beginner-level use cases, or none at all

1 in 4

cannot name a single work use case

15%

of reported use cases are likely to drive real ROI

A tool everyone owns and few can aim is not adoption. It is shelfware with a friendly interface.

WHY IT STALLS

Most organizations should target ten or more hours saved per person. Fewer than a third get close, because use cases never graduate from **convenience** to **leverage**. People stay in the shallow end because no one showed them the deep end of their own job.

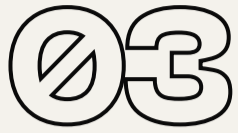
THE GOOD NEWS

A use-case problem is solvable. It is not a talent gap. Show people the three tasks in their week AI should already be doing, make it a habit instead of a hunt, and proficiency moves on its own.

WHAT IT MEANS

Stop teaching prompting. Start handing people their use cases. The bottleneck is imagination about the work, not skill with the tool.

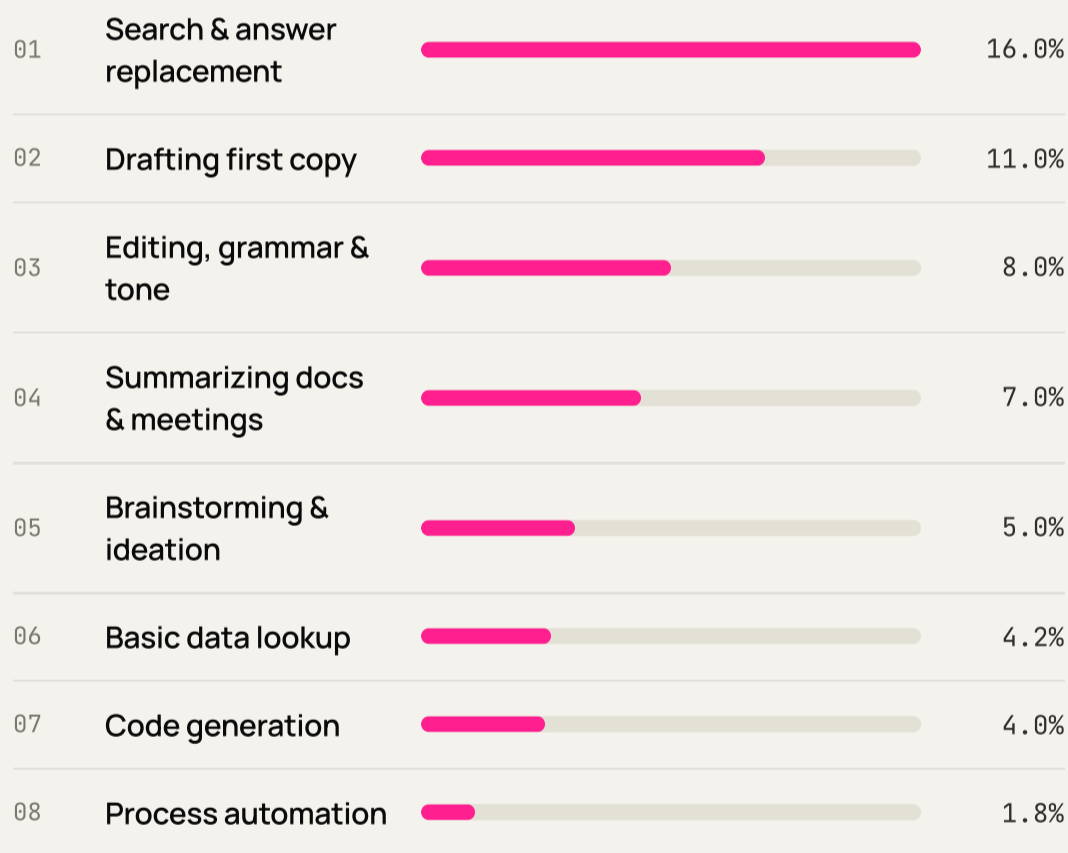
KEY FINDING 03 OF 09



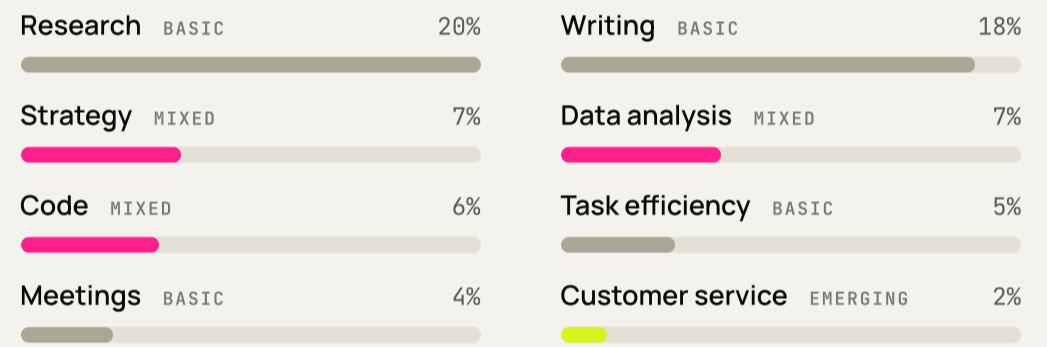
Most use cases will never pay for themselves.

Line up what people actually use AI for and the picture is overwhelmingly shallow. The most common most-valuable use case is replacing a search box. Drafting and editing copy come next. Real leverage, the automation and analysis that compounds, sits at the bottom where almost nobody lives.

TOP WORK-RELATED USE CASES · SHARE OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS



GROUPED BY CATEGORY · BY DEPTH OF USE

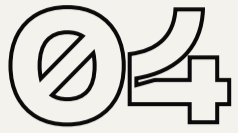


Over 59% of reported use cases are basic task assistance. Only about 2% qualify as advanced.

WHAT IT MEANS

The popular use cases are the shallow ones. Leverage lives at the bottom of the list, in automation and analysis, where almost nobody has set up shop yet.

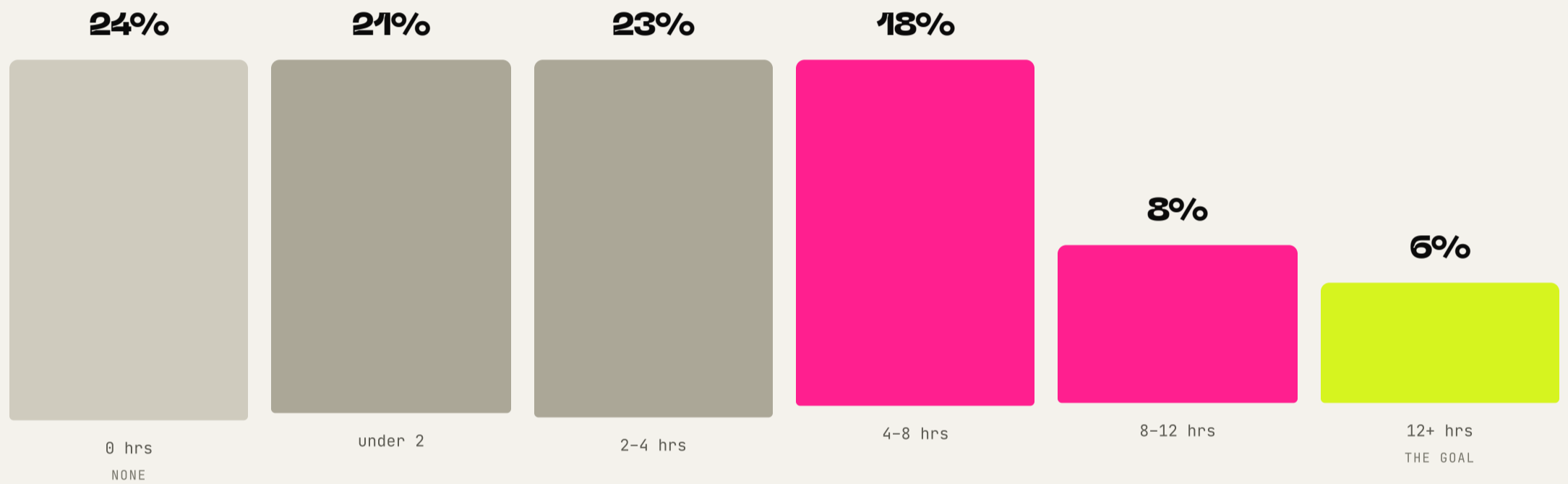
KEY FINDING 04 OF 09



Most workers barely save any time.

Because the use cases are basic, the payoff is small. Nearly a quarter of the workforce saves no time at all, and about two thirds save under four hours a week. The compounding only starts higher up the tiers, where practitioners save far more than experimenters and an order of magnitude more than novices.

WEEKLY HOURS SAVED WITH AI · SHARE OF WORKFORCE



Read left to right: the gray mass on the left is where most of the workforce lives. The colored bars on the right are where AI starts paying rent. About **68% of workers save under four hours a week**, well short of the ten-plus hours that turns AI spend into ROI.

1.8x

practitioners vs
experimenters clearing 4+
hrs

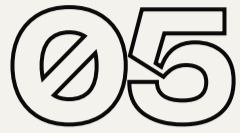
20x

practitioners vs novices
clearing 4+ hrs

WHAT IT MEANS

Time saved is a proficiency readout, not a tool readout. The same license returns twenty hours for an expert and zero for a novice. You are not buying hours, you are building them.

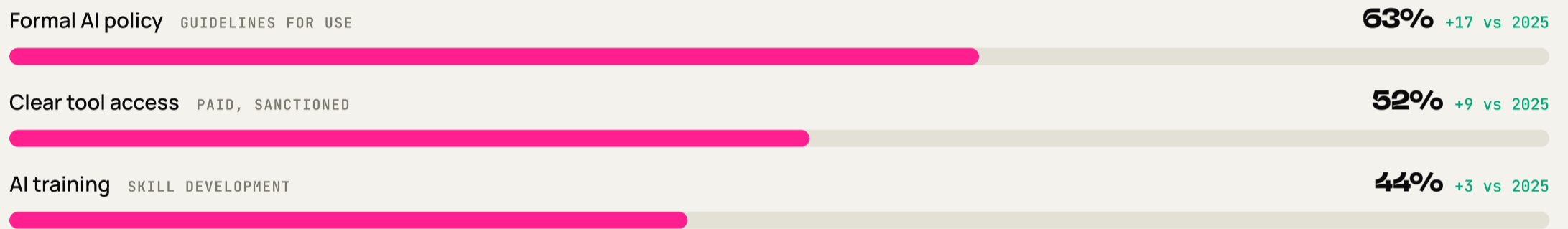
KEY FINDING 05 OF 09



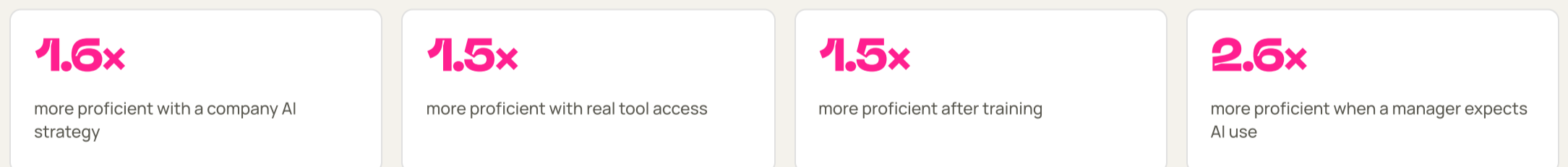
Companies are investing. It isn't closing the gap.

The directional bets are correct, and accelerating. More companies have a policy, more give real tool access, more run training than a year ago, and every one of these raises measured proficiency. The catch is what it raises proficiency **to**.

COMPANIES ARE ACCELERATING SUPPORT FOR AI ADOPTION



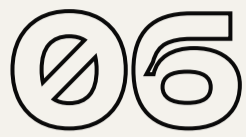
AND IT WORKS. EACH LEVER RAISES MEASURED PROFICIENCY



THE CATCH

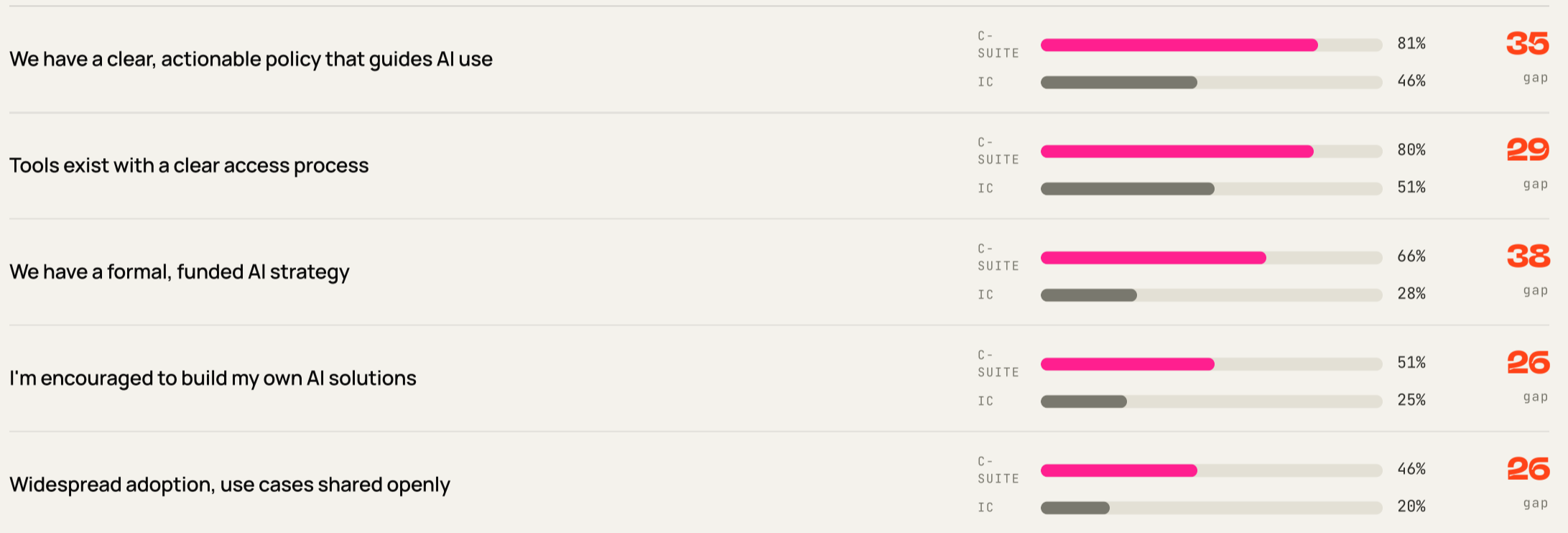
Employees who complete AI training still score, on average, **40 out of 100**. Training gets people to use AI safely and write a prompt. That is the right foundation and the wrong finish line. It does not teach anyone to find the bottleneck in their own week.

KEY FINDING 06 OF 09



Executives think it's working. The company disagrees.

The most expensive gap in this report is the one leaders cannot see. Across every marker of are-we-set-up-to-win, the C-suite answers yes far more often than the people they manage. Perceived AI maturity rises with seniority, which is exactly backwards from where the real work happens.



■ C-suite ■ Individual contributors 76% of execs think staff are excited about AI. 31% of ICs agree.

WHAT IT MEANS

Leaders are grading the deployment from the top of the building. The further you sit from the work, the better AI looks. Close this gap first, because every other fix depends on seeing clearly.

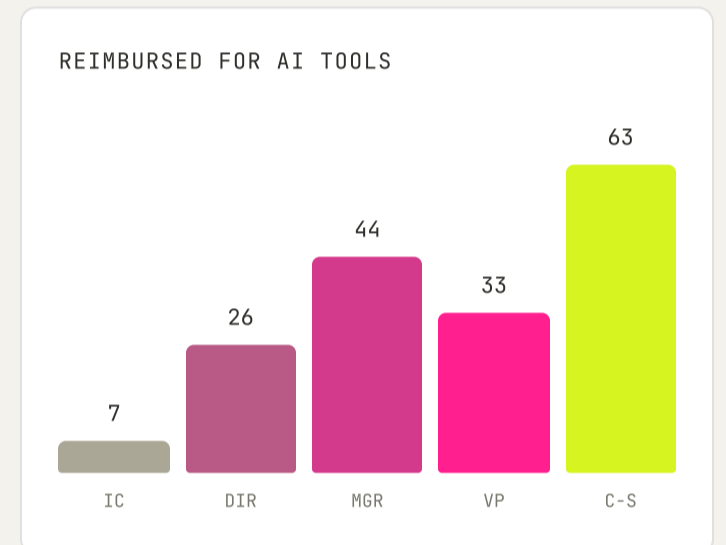
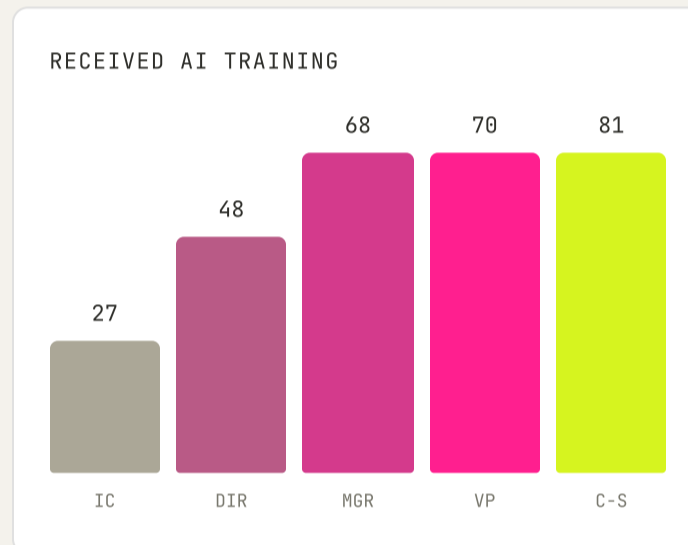
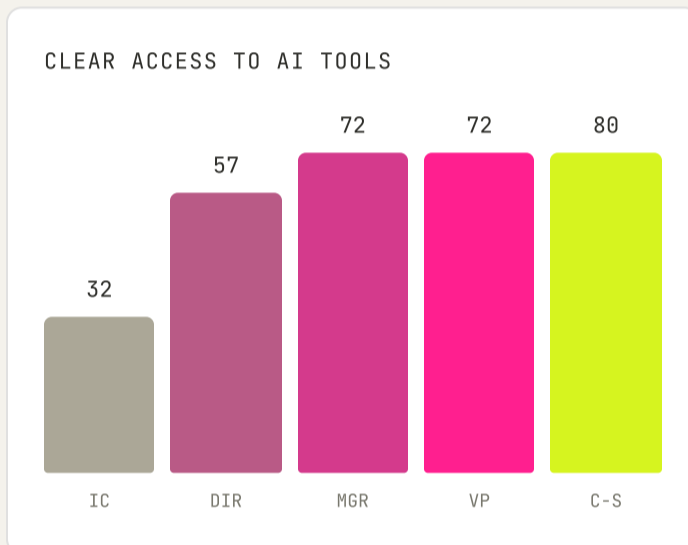
KEY FINDING 07 OF 09



Individual contributors are being left behind.

The workers who do the most repetitive, automatable work get the least of everything that drives proficiency. Less tool access, less training, far less reimbursement. Support climbs with every rung of seniority, the exact opposite of where the leverage sits.

ACCESS TO AI SUPPORT BY CAREER STAGE • PERCENT



7%

of ICs say a manager expects daily AI use

1 in 3

get any encouragement to use AI at all

-11%

manager support for ICs since May 2025

ICs are the most anxious about AI, the least likely to trust it, and the least likely to feel it changing their work. The group with the most repetitive, automatable work is the group you are supporting least. That is backwards, and it is the cheapest thing in this report to fix.

KEY FINDING 08 OF 09

08 The leading and lagging industries.

Look at the largest segment in each industry and a pattern snaps into focus. Leaders, technology, finance and consulting, are far likelier to have a real strategy, sanctioned tools and a clear policy. Laggards, healthcare, education and retail, are likelier to be missing all three. Same tools, very different systems around them.

INDUSTRY	PROFICIENCY / 100	AI STRATEGY	FREQUENCY	TIME SAVED
01 Technology	46	Formal	Daily	4-8 hrs
02 Finance	39	Formal	Daily	2-4 hrs
03 Consulting	38	Formal	Daily	2-4 hrs
04 Media	35	Developing	Several / wk	2-4 hrs
05 Manufacturing	34	Developing	Weekly	2-4 hrs
06 Real estate	32	Developing	Weekly	under 2
07 Education	30	None	Rarely	under 2
08 Healthcare	29	None	Rarely	0 hrs
09 Retail	27	None	Rarely	0 hrs

LEADERS · TECH, FINANCE, CONSULTING

Strategy, sanctioned tools, clear policy. Daily use, real hours saved.

LAGGARDS · HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, RETAIL

No strategy, no clear access, no policy. Rare use, no hours saved.

WHAT IT MEANS

Industry is not destiny. The same tools sit behind every one of these rows. The gap is the system around them: strategy, access, policy. That is a choice, not a sector.

KEY FINDING 09 OF 09



The leading and lagging functions.

Engineering, data and marketing lead, though even their scores are low. The startling part is what sits unused inside the high-performing functions. Many teams skip the single most obvious, highest-value use case for their own role.

FUNCTION	PROFICIENCY / 100	FREQUENCY	TIME SAVED
01 Engineering / Tech	45	Daily	4-8 hrs
02 Data & Analytics	41	Daily	4-8 hrs
03 Marketing	39	Daily	2-4 hrs
04 Sales / BizDev	38	Daily	2-4 hrs
05 Strategy	37	Several / wk	2-4 hrs
06 Product	35	Several / wk	2-4 hrs
07 Finance / Legal	33	Weekly	2-4 hrs
08 Operations	31	Rarely	under 2
09 Customer Service	28	Rarely	0-2 hrs

THE OBVIOUS WINS, UNUSED

54%

ENGINEERS

do not use AI to write or debug code.

56%

MARKETERS

do not use AI to draft first copy.

87%

PRODUCT MANAGERS

do not use AI to build prototypes.

WHAT IT MEANS

Even the leading functions skip their own highest-value use case. Proficiency is not about exotic prompts. It is about pointing AI at the obvious work first, the work the role was hired to do.

The 2026 mandate, written as the framework

THE BLANK COLLAR FRAMEWORK

$$TBC = V + D(P / HX)^{AI}$$

Vision plus Data, times Process over Human Experience, all raised to the power of AI. The gap will not close on its own, and the longer you wait the wider it gets. Each variable is a lever. The mandate is to fix the one you have been ignoring.

V

VISION

Redefine the win.

Stop counting logins. Kill adoption-rate vanity metrics. Track hours returned, use-case quality and outcomes. If most use AI weekly but few create value, your dashboard is lying to you.

D

DATA

Use cases are infrastructure.

Stop leaving them to chance. Build function-specific use-case libraries and role playbooks. Make use-case development a measured responsibility, not a hobby.

P

PROCESS

Train for the bottleneck.

Move from how to use AI safely to which step in your week AI should eliminate. A 40 out of 100 score after training means the program teaches the wrong thing.

HX

HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Bridge the IC gap.

The people doing the most automatable work have the least access. Backwards. Mandate three tracked use cases per direct report. Send executives to shadow real use.

AI

THE EXPONENT

The bar keeps rising.

It compounds, so build continuous learning, not a one-time course. Create a real path: experimenter, then practitioner, then expert, with a route between each.

Start here

Pick the weakest variable for your org this quarter. Most companies are strong on tools and weak on Process and Human Experience. That is where the next ten hours per person are hiding.

One idea, put to work three ways



THE POST-AI WORKER

A philosophy. A framework. A codex.

$TBC = V + D(P / HX)^{AI}$, the manifesto behind it, and a living codex of 13 mental models for the intelligence age. Free at the door.

blankcollar.ai

FOR COMPANIES

The agentic operating system.

Infrastructure that puts AI to work on the process itself, so people return to the work that actually requires them.

blankcollar.university

FOR PEOPLE & TEAMS

The school.

Programs, certification and company engagements that turn the framework into capability, so teams actually become Blank Collars.

blankcollar.ventures

FOR FOUNDERS & VCS

The operating partner.

We back AI startups and help them win, with the framework and hard-won operating experience in the room.

Close the gap before it rises again.

Read the manifesto

Get the thinking

theblankcollar.com

Work is for **bots**.
Life is for **humans**.