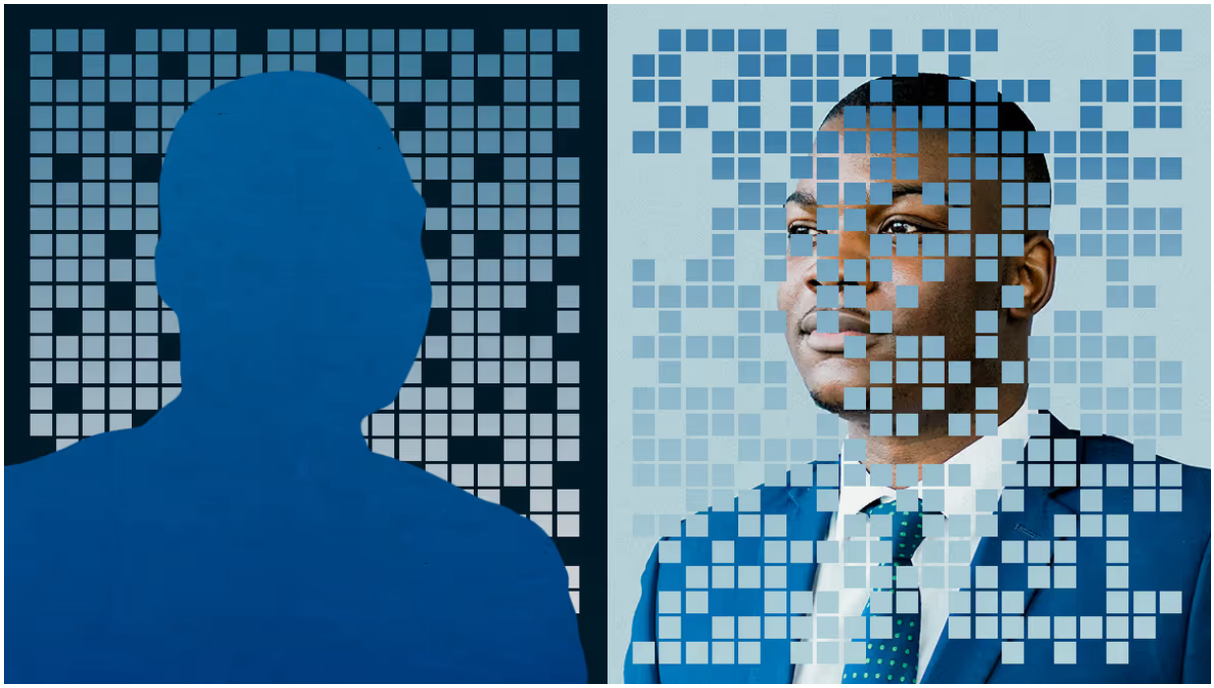
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

Collaboration And Teams

How AI Erodes People's Sense of Value at Work

by Zach Mercurio

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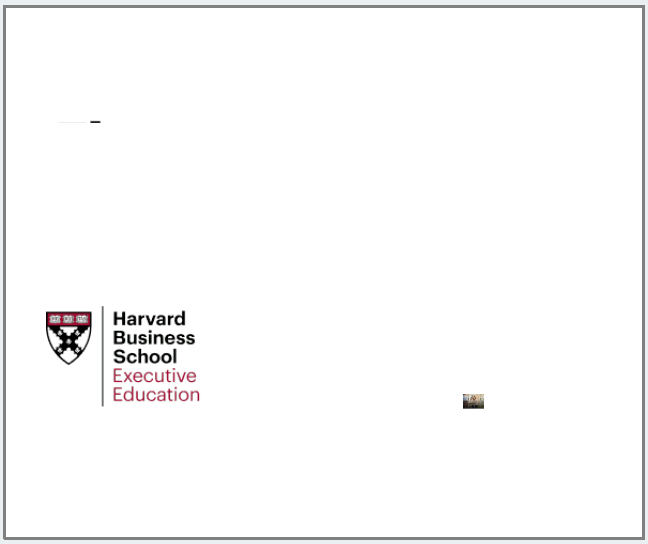
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Summary. As organizations adopt AI to increase efficiency and capability, they risk undermining employees' sense that they matter at work. This feeling of *mattering*—those experiences that help... **more**

In a conversation with a management team at a building materials company, I asked what they noticed since AI use became widespread. There were the usual comments about uncertainty and "slop," but then one manager said, "No one really

asks me anything anymore. They just ask Copilot. Sometimes I wonder, 'What's my point?'"

I've seen enough AI presentations and implementation plans within organizations to notice a pattern. Leaders are spending a lot of time planning for what AI can do *for* people and not nearly enough time planning for what AI will do *to* people.



One consequence that deserves more attention is how AI can erode people's sense of significance at work. Instead of asking a colleague or leader for help or advice, we can now ask AI. Expertise that once made someone the person others counted on is now accessible to anyone. Work people created with their skills and talents can now become work they review and approve. These shifts don't necessarily eliminate people's jobs, but they can eliminate what makes people feel that they matter *in* their jobs, such as feeling needed, making meaningful connections, or contributing something unique.

Research shows that feeling insignificant at work is associated with lower engagement and satisfaction and can contribute to burnout and reduced performance. As leaders consider how to deploy AI to amplify capability and efficiency, they should also strategize how to preserve or redesign experiences that help people know they matter.

A Widening Mattering Gap?

In a study of more than 1,000 first-person accounts about AI's impact on workers, one story sticks with me. A school worker was tasked with developing a children's book. She spent dedicated time crafting a story and creating artwork but then fell ill for a week. When she returned, she discovered that her supervisor replaced her artwork with AI-generated images and finished the book without her.

"I cried all the way home and for the next few hours," she wrote.

What strikes me about her account isn't just that AI completed her work. It's the sense of dispensability she felt when her supervisor used AI instead of her to save time and made that decision without her. The experience, time, and creativity she already invested seemed to count for nothing. It's hard to feel that we matter when we feel replaceable.

While the school worker experienced the toll of being directly replaced by AI, more employees describe how the changing nature of their work is more subtly eroding their sense of significance. In the same study, a graphic designer described how AI image-generation tools are affecting him: "The job is becoming less about executing the first idea and more about curating,

refining, and adding the crucial human touch…It feels less like I lost my job and more like my job description was rewritten overnight." One engineer recently described people working all day "just to press 'enter'…everything is done by LLMs. It is so soul-sucking." This shift from creating and originating work to reviewing and refining it can strip away opportunities to use our unique strengths and skills to make a meaningful contribution—the very experience that's central to feeling that we matter at work.

We're now seeing the threat to significance show up in new data. In one poll of more than 6,000 employees, 44% said they worry their skills won't be needed anymore. A Pew Research Center survey found that half of people believed AI would make building meaningful relationships more difficult. And recent research suggests that tasks workers associate with "a sense of agency or happiness may be disproportionately exposed to AI."

Work gives people more than tasks to do for money. As psychologist David Blustein writes, work can provide people with "a sense of mattering that can help give purpose to one's life." This experience of *mattering*—feeling seen, heard, valued, and needed—is linked to engagement, commitment, and individual and organizational performance.

To be clear, this doesn't mean keeping tasks just to preserve people's sense of significance. But as leaders decide how to deploy AI, they need to consider not only what technology will allow people to stop doing, but also what people may stop experiencing.

The AI Mattering Test

In research for my book *The Power of Mattering*, I discovered three primary experiences that contribute to a sense of mattering at work: being noticed (feeling seen and heard), being affirmed (seeing how our unique strengths make a difference), and being needed (knowing that we and what we do are depended on).

Leaders can use three questions to evaluate how AI deployment may change each of these experiences and consider what they can do to preserve or even strengthen them.

1. Does this use of AI make it easier or harder for people to feel seen and heard?

Feeling noticed at work often happens in ordinary interactions, such as being asked for ideas, sharing our feedback, or having someone check in on us and our work. Research shows that as AI use increases, interactions that help us feel seen and heard can decrease.

Leaders can preserve these opportunities in two primary ways:

- **Scan for disappearing interactions.** Catalog interactions that may disappear as AI use grows. What might the individual and the culture lose? For example, an employee's outreach to a leader for input could also create time for that leader to check in, notice their energy, or learn more about their challenges. These in-between moments of connection often shape relationships and culture. If those interactions disappear, how will you recreate the time and space for them?
- **Create "ask AI / ask a person" norms.** The management team I spoke with at the building materials company realized they

had deployed AI without shared norms for when to use AI and when to go to a person. New research shows that when colleagues turn to AI instead of each other, they're almost half as likely to feel that they matter. That's why setting norms for when people should ask AI versus a person matters for preserving a sense of significance. For example, teams might use AI to locate and summarize information, but they should go to a person for help with a messy problem affecting others. Atlassian's Teamwork Lab developed an AI Collaboration Framework to help teams choose between AI-first and human-first approaches. Leaders can engage team members in co-creating a working agreement that guides how AI should be used while uncovering what human interactions matter most. Then, leaders can protect that human work. For example, in strategic conversations, employees might share their ideas and perspectives before using AI to expand their thinking. Or, when solving a tough problem, teams might agree to consult those with relevant expertise before asking AI. In an internal experiment, these working agreements reduced anxiety about AI and increased confidence in working with it.

2. Does this use of AI make it easier or harder for people to use their unique strengths to make a difference?

Feeling affirmed at work means seeing how our unique strengths make a difference. As AI takes on more work, this can become harder, and this loss of mattering can reduce motivation and even stifle innovation. In one experiment, researchers asked participants to evaluate identical slogans for a public health campaign. Half were told the slogan was created by AI, while the other half were told a person created it. Those who were told AI

developed the slogan found the task less meaningful. More strikingly, they were 13% less likely to contribute their own slogan idea when given the opportunity.

These practices can help leaders make sure people can still see their unique contributions:

- **Make human contribution visible and protect opportunities to originate work.** As tasks change, help people identify how their unique strengths still make a difference. For AI-assisted work, highlight human contribution rather than simply recognizing the final product. For example, the school employee's supervisor may have simply seen AI as a faster way to finish the project while she was away. But as AI makes it easier to complete work without people, it can also make it easier to overlook the people behind the work. Instead, the school employee's supervisor could have affirmed her creativity, acknowledged her initial contributions, and involved her in decisions about how AI would be used in the final project. In work that draws on people's creativity or expertise, it's especially important to protect opportunities to originate ideas before AI is brought in.
- **Find new opportunities for people's strengths.** As AI changes job compositions, it can also create opportunities to identify and leverage underutilized employee strengths and contributions. For example, Schneider Electric developed an "Open Talent Market," an AI-powered internal talent marketplace that matches employees' interests and unique skills with projects, opportunities, and partners across the

company. Employees can spend up to 20% of their time using their skills on these projects outside of their roles. Leaders can do this on a smaller scale by asking employees which strengths they use less as AI takes on more and by having conversations about where employees want to contribute more. Then, look for projects, challenges, or opportunities where those unique strengths can add value.

3. Does this use of AI make it easier or harder for people to feel needed by others and the organization?

Feeling needed at work means knowing someone else depends on us and what we do. Leaders can unintentionally make people feel unneeded by focusing too much on what AI can do, without being equally clear about why people are still needed.

These practices can help:

- **Clarify what people are needed for.** When introducing tools, don't just explain which tasks will be automated. Help people see how they're still needed. For example, if AI takes over analysts' reporting tasks, explain how they're now depended on for their judgment on how to interpret the data and make decisions—a contribution that's distinctly human and built on their years of experience. Make sure employees can answer: Who needs me? What do they need from me? Why does it matter?

- **Reinvest AI time savings where people are needed.** Recently, the financial services company Sun Life introduced an AI

assistant that summarizes client meetings and takes on follow-up tasks. The tool is estimated to save advisors up to 30 minutes per meeting. But rather than touting the tool as just a productivity gain, executive Laura Money called the saved time an "empathy dividend." The goal was to give advisors more time to help in ways only humans can: offering more personalized support, listening more closely, or helping clients navigate difficult life situations. Consider the time AI saves and ask these two questions. For leaders: How can we reinvest this time where our people are uniquely needed? And for employees: Where could I invest this time where my skills and strengths are uniquely needed?

"What's My Point?"

As technology continues to be used to amplify efficiency and capability, leaders must become better at amplifying connection and contribution. Remember that many employees are likely asking the same question as the manager I spoke with: "What's my point?" Leaders need to help people answer it. After all, it's hard for anything to matter to someone who doesn't believe that they matter.



Zach Mercurio is a researcher and adviser on purposeful leadership and meaningful work. He is a senior honorary fellow at Colorado State University's Center for Meaning and Purpose and the author of *The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025).

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