

Work in the Age of Cognition

Navigating the labor transition with augmentation, mobility, and a fair share of the gains

PREPARED FOR LABOR LEADERS · EDUCATORS · HR EXECUTIVES · ECONOMIC POLICYMAKERS



FAIR Labs

FAIR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RESEARCH LABS

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Work in the Age of Cognition: Navigating the labor transition with augmentation, mobility, and a fair share of the gains

The eighth volume of the Frontier Series examines what advanced AI actually does to work: not the disappearance of jobs but their recomposition, task by task, at a speed no previous technology transition has matched. Its central claim is that the transition rate — not the destination — is the policy variable that separates a humane adjustment from a brutal one. The report maps exposure and complementarity across task families, designs the mobility infrastructure a fast transition requires, and argues for worker voice and a fair share of the dividend.

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IN BRIEF • EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jobs are not vanishing. They are recomposing.

The fight is over the speed — and the share.

Advanced AI does not delete occupations wholesale; it pulls apart the bundles of tasks we call jobs and re-bundles them around new tools. That recomposition can be the best labor story in a century or the cruelest in living memory — with the same technology, the same endpoint, the same total change. What differs is the speed of the change and who holds power while it happens. Those are choices, and this report is about making them well.

01 Work recomposes; it rarely disappears.

Jobs are bundles of tasks. AI absorbs some tasks, transforms others, and creates new ones — then the bundles re-form. The real questions are how fast, on whose terms, and with what bridge for the people mid-transition.

02 Exposure is not destiny.

A task family's exposure to AI tells you where change arrives, not what it does on arrival. Demand elasticity, latent demand, and quality floors decide whether exposed work shrinks, grows, or transforms — and organizations choose augment or replace.

03 The transition rate is the policy variable.

The same recomposition is humane over fifteen years and brutal over five. When annual churn exceeds what mobility systems can absorb, the surplus becomes unemployment, scarring, and backlash. Managing the rate is the job.

04 Mobility infrastructure answers a flow problem.

Portable benefits, rapid credentials, worker-following adjustment funds, skills-based hiring, and care support are not welfare add-ons. They are the throughput capacity that determines how much change a workforce can metabolize per year.

05 Voice makes adoption smarter, not slower.

Deployments designed over workers fail on their own terms — quietly sabotaged, poorly integrated, blind to the tacit knowledge that makes workflows run. Structured worker voice is an accuracy mechanism before it is a fairness one.

06 The dividend has three channels — none opens itself.

Gains reach households as wages, as lower prices, or as ownership income. Each channel needs deliberate machinery — bargaining, competition, broad equity. Absent that machinery, the default destination of the dividend is the deploying firm.

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01

The great recomposition: what actually happens to work

The question "will there be jobs?" has dominated a decade of debate and clarified almost nothing. Jobs are not atoms. They are molecules — bundles of tasks held together by convention, technology, and cost — and what AI changes is the bonds.

Take apart any occupation and you find dozens of distinct tasks: gathering information, drafting, checking, deciding, persuading, comforting, coordinating, lifting. A "job" is simply the bundle it made sense to hand one person when the tools were what they were. Every general-purpose technology in history has worked by re-pricing individual tasks, not by abolishing occupations by name — and the bundles then re-formed around the new prices. Spreadsheets absorbed manual tabulation; the people called bookkeepers largely became something adjacent, doing analysis the old bundle never had room for. The occupation's name survived; its contents turned over.

Told honestly, the historical pattern has two halves, and both matter. The comforting half: over the long run, technology has expanded employment, raised wages, and created task categories no one could have named in advance — most of today's occupations did not exist in any meaningful form a century ago. The uncomfortable half: **the long run is a statistical abstraction that no household lives in.** Real transitions ran through decades of depressed wages, hollowed towns, and workers whose skills were repriced faster than their lives could adjust. Both halves are true. Policy built on only the first is complacency; policy built on only the second is paralysis.

WHY THIS TRANSITION IS NOT A RERUN

Three features distinguish the cognitive transition from the mechanical ones. **Breadth:** language-capable systems touch tasks across nearly every white-collar occupation at once — there is no single unaffected sector to absorb the displaced. **Speed:** software diffuses in quarters, not the decades tractors took; the constraint is organizational adoption, not capital stock. **Direction:** for the first time the most exposed tasks sit in the middle and upper-middle of the wage distribution — the work industrial-era ladders trained people to climb toward.

None of this settles what happens next, and this report will not pretend to forecast net employment in 2035 — a number nobody possesses. What the recomposition frame does settle is *which questions are decision-relevant*. Not "will there be jobs?" — history, demand elasticity, and human inventiveness argue yes, eventually, differently. The operative questions are: How fast do the bundles come apart? Who decides how they re-form? And through which channel do the gains — real and large, as Volume 02 documents — reach the households bearing the adjustment?

Each of those questions has an answer someone chooses. Adoption speed is chosen by firms and shaped by policy. The augment-or-replace design point is chosen by managers. Absorption capacity is chosen by legislatures, educators, and employers, budget line by budget line. Distribution is chosen by bargaining structures, competition policy, and ownership design. The transition, in other words, is not weather. It is governance — the same lesson the capability-assurance gap teaches at the frontier (Volume 01), landing here on the shop floor.

02

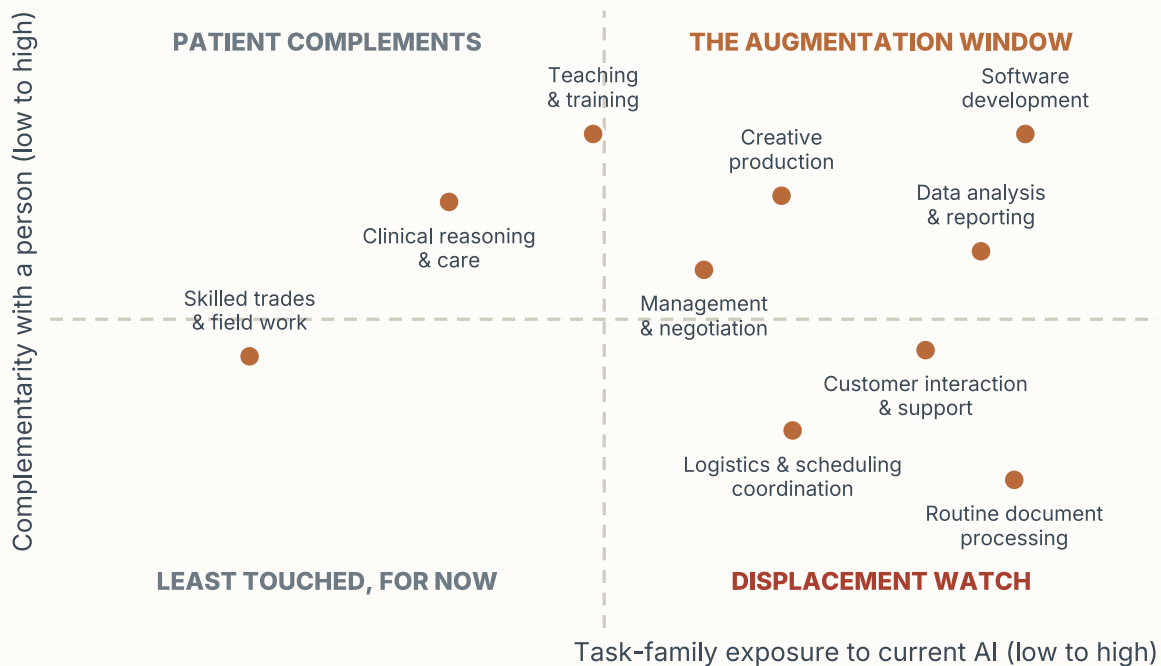
The exposure map — and the augmentation window

Exposure measures where AI can reach; complementarity measures what the reaching does. Confusing the two produces both of the era's signature errors — panic about work that will transform, and complacency about work that will compress.

FAIR Labs assesses task families on two axes. **Exposure:** how much of the family's task content current systems can perform at commercially relevant quality. **Complementarity:** how much a person plus the tool outperforms the tool alone — how much the residual human tasks (judgment, accountability, relationship, presence) gain value when the routine core is absorbed. Exhibit 8.1 arranges ten families on this grid. Software development is among the most exposed families on the map *and* among the most complementary — recomposition territory, not disappearance territory — while routine document processing pairs high exposure with a thin human residual, which is where displacement pressure genuinely concentrates.

EXHIBIT 8.1 • FAIR LABS ASSESSMENT (ILLUSTRATIVE INDEX)

Ten task families on the exposure × complementarity grid



FAIR Labs analytical construct: positions reflect the report's qualitative reading of current capability and workflow structure, scored for comparison, not measurement. Families are coarse; individual roles within a family can sit far from its centroid. Positions drift up and right as capability advances — the map is a snapshot, not a verdict.

2.1 Why exposure is not displacement

Three economic forces stand between "AI can do the task" and "the worker loses the job."

Demand elasticity: when the cost of a task falls, demand for it often rises more than proportionally — cheaper code has historically meant more programmers, not fewer. **Latent demand:** entire categories of work exist at volumes rationed by expert scarcity — tutoring, preventive medicine, legal help for ordinary people — and expansion there absorbs capacity that displacement releases. **Quality floors:** in consequential domains, output without accountable human verification is not a cheaper product but a different, often unsellable one; the assurance requirements Volume 06 describes are, seen from the labor side, a source of durable human tasks. None of these forces is automatic or infinite. They are why the exposure map marks where pressure arrives, not what it destroys.

2.2 The augmentation window

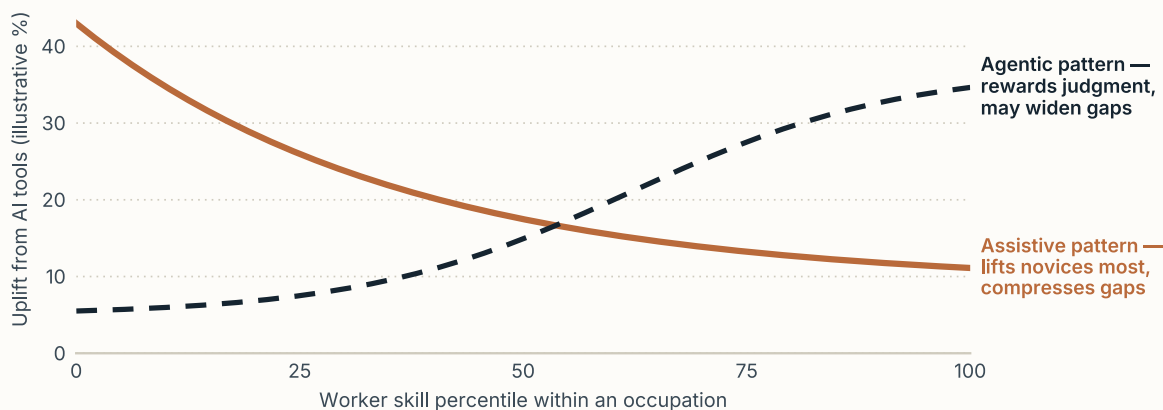
For most exposed families there is an interval — the **augmentation window** — during which the technology genuinely works better wrapped around a person than substituted for one: the tool is capable but unreliable, context still lives in human heads, and cus-

tomers still price human accountability. Inside the window, organizations face a real choice between designing AI *around* their workforce and designing it *instead of* their workforce — a choice of managerial philosophy, not a technical inevitability. Firms choose augmentation when workers hold tacit knowledge the tool needs, when quality is legible to customers, and when workers have voice in the deployment; they choose replacement when work has already been standardized into vendor-legible fragments. The window is a policy target: everything in Chapters 4–6 is designed to hold it open longer and make the augment branch the profitable one.

Who gains inside the window is its own contested question — the "levels versus gaps" debate sketched in Exhibit 8.2. Early evidence on assistive tools pointed one way: the largest uplifts accrued to the least experienced, compressing performance gaps — the best practitioner's playbook, distributed to everyone. Agentic delegation may point the other way: when the tool executes and the human directs, returns flow to judgment, taste, and the ability to specify and verify — capacities that correlate with experience. Neither pattern is destiny; which dominates depends on how tools are designed and who is trained to direct them. A workforce strategy that assumes compression will be blindsided if delegation wins.

EXHIBIT 8.2 • ILLUSTRATIVE

Levels vs gaps: two patterns of AI uplift across the skill distribution



Stylized curves expressing two hypotheses about who gains most from AI tools, not measurements of any study or occupation. The assistive shape echoes the direction of early workplace research; the agentic shape is a plausible successor pattern as delegation deepens. Both can hold at once in different task families.

03

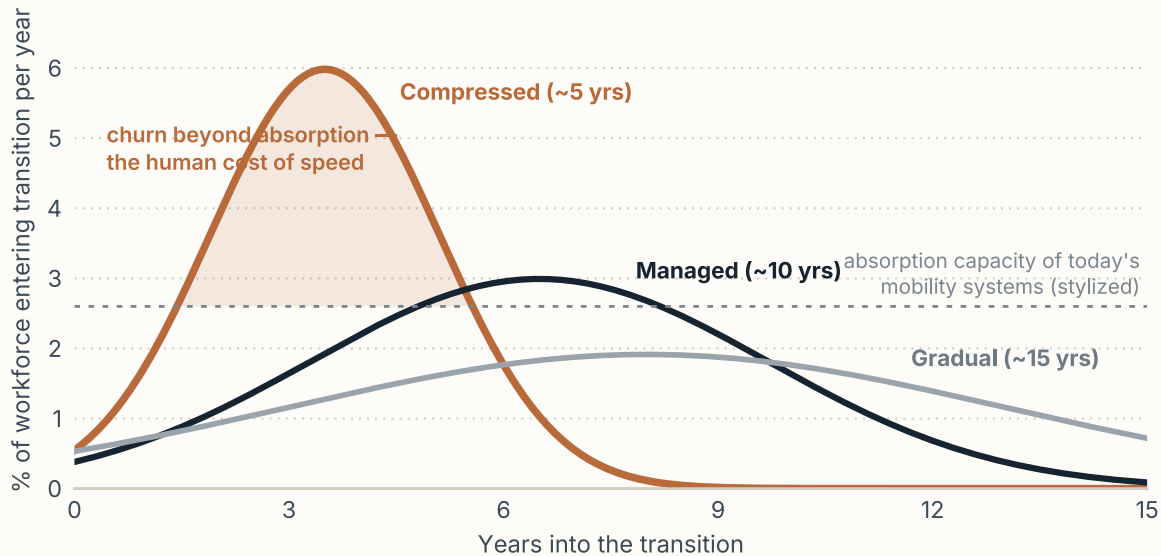
The transition rate: one journey, three speeds

Labor markets are flow systems. Every year some workers separate from recomposing roles; some are absorbed into new ones. When separations outrun absorptions, the difference does not queue politely — it becomes unemployment, scarring, and politics.

The single most consequential reframing this report offers is to stop arguing about the *stock* of jobs in 2035 and start managing the *flow* of workers through transition each year. The stock question is unknowable and, strictly, not actionable. The flow question is both knowable and governable: separations per year are shaped by adoption speed, procurement rules, notice requirements, and the augment-versus-replace choices of Chapter 2; absorptions per year are shaped by the mobility infrastructure of Chapter 4 — how fast a displaced claims adjuster can become a licensed care coordinator, whether her benefits survive the move, and whether she can afford the childcare and the commute the new role demands.

EXHIBIT 8.3 • STYLIZED

The same recomposition at three speeds — the pain lives above the line



Analytical construct, not a forecast. Each curve delivers the same total recomposition — 24% of workforce task-hours over the period — at a different tempo. The dashed line stylizes the annual churn today's mobility systems absorb without scarring. The shaded area is the point: identical endpoints, radically different human cost. Note that even the managed pace briefly crests the line.

24%

of task-hours recomposed in our stylized scenario — identical across all three speeds

2.5×

peak-year churn in the compressed path vs the gradual one — same journey, different casualty rate

0

additional task-hours recomposed by year 15 on the fast path — speed buys pain, not progress

Exhibit 8.3 makes the argument in one picture. Three transitions, identical endpoints, different tempos. The gradual path stays within what existing mobility systems absorb. The compressed path piles half the adjustment into three peak years, and the churn above the absorption line has nowhere to go: it becomes long-duration unemployment, labor-force exit, and the specific bitterness of people who did everything right and were repriced anyway. Labor economics calls the result scarring — earnings losses that persist for decades, concentrated in the places and age cohorts least able to bear them. And scarred regions do not simply suffer; they organize. A transition that outruns its mobility systems will eventually be slowed by the ballot box, on terms far cruder than any adoption policy — likely freezing the abundance dividend of Volume 02 in the process.

THE CENTRAL CLAIM OF THIS VOLUME

The transition rate is a policy variable, not a law of nature. Adoption speed responds to procurement standards, assurance requirements, notice periods, and bargaining; absorption speed responds to every instrument in Chapter 4. A society that manages the ratio of the two — keeping annual churn at or below annual absorption capacity while building that capacity up — gets the entire recomposition with a fraction of the harm. That ratio, not any headline unemployment number, is the gauge to watch.

From inside a household, "too fast" is concrete: a mortgage that assumed two incomes in an occupation that stopped hiring; retraining that requires eighteen unpaid months nobody can finance; a credential that expires at a state line; growing jobs three hundred miles from the schools, the parents, and the second income the family depends on. Every one of those frictions is a designable surface. That is the work of the next chapter.

Same technology, same endpoint, same total change: at one speed a renaissance, at another a rupture. Societies do not get to choose whether work recomposes. They get to choose the rate — which means choosing it deliberately is the whole game.

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT OF THIS REPORT

04

Mobility infrastructure: five instruments, one system

If the problem is flow, the answer is throughput: raise how many transitions per year the labor market can absorb without scarring. FAIR Labs groups the proven and promising machinery into five instruments — effective as a system, marginal as a menu.

The phrase **mobility infrastructure** is chosen deliberately. Roads are not a subsidy to drivers; they are the capacity that makes movement routine. The five instruments below play that role for career movement — boring, capital-intensive, transformative in aggregate. Exhibit 8.4 states each instrument's job in flow terms: which friction it removes from the path between a shrinking task bundle and a growing one.

WHAT MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE IS NOT

It is not a verdict in the universal-basic-income debate, for or against. Income floors answer a different question — what people are owed unconditionally — and this report takes no position on them here. Mobility infrastructure answers the narrower, nearer question every economy faces regardless: given that millions will move between task bundles, does the path between bundles take eighteen scarring months or four supported ones? Even economies that eventually adopt broad income floors will need the roads.

EXHIBIT 8.4 • CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The five instruments of mobility infrastructure

INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT DOES	FRICTION IT REMOVES	MATURITY
Portable benefits & wage insurance	Health, retirement, and income smoothing attach to the worker; wage insurance bridges the pay cut a mid-career move often requires.	Job lock, and the wage cliff between the old role and the first new one.	Proven pattern
Skills passports & rapid credentialing	Verified records of what a worker can actually do, plus credentials earnable in weeks and recognized across employers.	Invisible skill — capable movers illegible to hiring systems; retraining built for 20-year-olds.	Strong pilots
Adjustment funding that follows the worker	Pre-funded individual transition accounts, spendable at accredited providers, keyed to displacement itself — not to proving its cause.	The attribution trap — help that arrives only after the cause of a lay-off is litigated.	Strong pilots
Hiring-side reform	Skills-based hiring that drops degree proxies; licensure mutual recognition and fast-track paths into adjacent occupations.	Paper walls — credential filters and state-line license resets that screen out the qualified.	Uneven adoption
Care & geographic mobility supports	Childcare and eldercare that make retraining hours possible; relocation help and housing supply where the growing work is.	The anchor problem — transitions foreclosed by care duties and housing costs.	Chronic gap

FAIR Labs framework. "Maturity" pills are the report's qualitative judgment of how well-evidenced each instrument is across advanced economies, not a measurement. The instruments compound — each removes a different friction on the same journey — which is why partial stacks disappoint.

Two design principles govern the stack. **Fund the flow, not the fault.** Programs that condition help on proving *why* a job vanished spend their energy on forensics and arrive after the scarring; in a recomposition, causes are braided and attribution is theater. **Build before the surge.** Absorption capacity is like grid capacity: it must exist before peak load, because building it during the peak is triage. The moment to finance these rails is now, while the churn curve is on its shallow slope — precisely when the urgency is hardest to feel.

05

Voice and the dividend: who decides, who gains

Two questions decide whether the recomposition is done with workers or to them: who sits at the table when adoption is designed, and through which channel the gains reach households. Power, then money — in that order, because the first largely determines the second.

5.1 Why voice is an accuracy mechanism

The case for worker voice in AI adoption does not rest on fairness alone; it rests on engineering. Deployments designed over the heads of the people who do the work fail on their own terms with remarkable regularity, and the failure modes are predictable: the tool automates the legible 70% of a workflow and breaks the tacit 30% that never appeared in any process document; metrics improve while the mess is displaced onto adjacent teams; workers who were never consulted treat the system as an adversary, feeding it minimum-viable compliance and quietly routing around it. The organizations that capture augmentation value are, disproportionately, the ones that treated their workforce as co-designers — workers know where the bodies are buried in a workflow, and only volunteers tell you.

The structural answer is older than the technology: standing consultation bodies — works councils in one tradition, labor-management committees in others — with three rights for the AI era: to be *informed* early (what is deployed, to do what, measured how); to be *consulted* on design (which tasks, what fallback, what training); and to *negotiate* consequences (staffing, pay, monitoring). Alongside them, guardrails on algorithmic management, because the same systems that augment work can also intensify it into piecework with a dashboard:

- **Transparency:** workers can see the data collected about them and the factors behind scores that gate pay, scheduling, or discipline.
- **Human authority:** no sanction on algorithmic output alone; a named human decides and is accountable — Volume 06's authority principle, at work.

- **Bounded surveillance:** monitoring proportionate to a stated purpose, with off-limits zones and retention limits.
- **Contestability:** a usable appeal path with deadlines, and audit trails that make appeals adjudicable.

5.2 Three channels for the dividend

Suppose the augmentation succeeds and the surplus is real. By what route does it reach households? There are exactly three, scored in Exhibit 8.5. **Wages:** productivity bargaining converts measured gains into pay and hours — direct and morale-anchoring, but it reaches only workers with bargaining power, in firms capturing the gains. **Prices:** competition passes gains to everyone as cheaper goods and services — the invisible dividend Volume 02 shows carried most past technology windfalls to households. Its breadth is unmatched; its weakness is that it arrives only where markets are contestable, and concentrated AI supply chains (Volume 07) are a standing threat to that. **Ownership:** profit-sharing, broad-based equity, and public wealth funds route returns on AI capital to people as capital income — the most durable channel and the slowest, hostage to design quality and political stamina.

EXHIBIT 8.5 • FAIR LABS ASSESSMENT (ILLUSTRATIVE INDEX)

Three dividend channels scored on five criteria (1 = weak · 5 = strong)

Wages — productivity bargaining	3	2	3	2	3
Prices — competition & diffusion	5	3	4	3	4
Ownership — profit-sharing & public funds	2	1	5	2	2
	Breadth of reach	Speed of arrival	Durability	Reaches the displaced	Political resilience

FAIR Labs analytical construct: scores are the report's comparative judgment, on a 1–5 scale, of each channel's structural properties — not estimates of any economy's outcomes. The lesson of the grid is complementarity: no row is strong everywhere, so serious dividend policy runs all three channels at once.

The sober assessment: each channel has a failure mode currently active. Wage bargaining covers a shrinking share of the exposed workforce. Price pass-through is dulled wherever a handful of firms control the models, the compute, or the distribution. Ownership schemes are chronically under-ambitious — profit pools sized for gestures, wealth funds proposed and shelved. The channels also compound: workers with voice bargain for wage shares, competition authorities keep the price channel open, and ownership

stakes give labor a reason to want the technology to succeed. Distribution, like safety, is not a tax on the transition. It is what makes the transition politically durable enough to complete.

A dividend with no channel is not a dividend. It is a windfall, and windfalls sit where they land.

CHAPTER 5, ON WHY DISTRIBUTION NEEDS MACHINERY

06

The FAIR agenda for work: eight moves

Eight recommendations, each with a named owner, sequenced to be started now — while the churn curve is shallow and the choices are still cheap. Together they raise absorption, protect the augmentation window, and open all three dividend channels.

WK-01 Instrument the transition: build a real-time labor observatory

Task-level flow data — separations, absorptions, time-in-transition, wage recovery — published quarterly, so the churn-vs-absorption ratio this report centers is watched like inflation, not reconstructed by historians.

OWNERS: **MINISTRIES OF LABOR · STATISTICS AGENCIES** · SEE ALSO: VOL 02

WK-02 Make benefits portable by default

Health, retirement, and accrued leave attach to the worker and move with her, with wage insurance for mid-career movers — dissolving job lock before the peak transition years arrive.

OWNERS: **LEGISLATURES · MINISTRIES OF LABOR · PLATFORM COMPANIES** · DEEP DIVE: §4

WK-03 Build the skills-passport rails

Interoperable, verified skill records and weeks-long credentials with teeth — co-designed by educators and employers so the assessment measures the task, and hiring systems can read the result.

OWNERS: **EDUCATORS · STANDARDS BODIES · EMPLOYERS** · SEE ALSO: VOL 09 ON VERIFICATION

WK-04 Fund adjustment that follows the worker, not the fault

Pre-funded individual transition accounts triggered by displacement itself — no attribution forensics — spendable at accredited providers, with outcomes published to starve the credential mills.

OWNERS: **MINISTRIES OF LABOR · LEGISLATURES** · DEEP DIVE: §4

WK-05 Tear down the paper walls

Skills-based hiring in every public-sector posting as the demonstration case; licensure mutual recognition and scope review so a credential earned in one jurisdiction is not confiscated at the border of the next.

OWNERS: **EMPLOYERS · HR EXECUTIVES · LICENSURE BOARDS**

WK-06 Put adoption on the bargaining table

Standing labor-management AI committees with inform-consult-negotiate rights, and agreements that trade smoother adoption for augmentation-first design, training in work hours, and a stated share of measured gains.

OWNERS: **UNIONS · EMPLOYERS · WORKS COUNCILS** · SEE ALSO: VOL 10 FOR THE BOARD VIEW

WK-07 Guardrail algorithmic management

Statutory floors: transparency of scoring, human authority over sanctions, proportionate monitoring with off-limits zones, and contestability with deadlines — the four rules of §5.1, made enforceable.

OWNERS: **MINISTRIES OF LABOR · REGULATORS · PLATFORM COMPANIES** · SEE ALSO: VOL 04

WK-08 Run all three dividend channels at once

Productivity bargaining where labor is organized; competition enforcement where it is not; and ownership vehicles — broad equity, profit-sharing with real pools, public wealth instruments — for the long run.

OWNERS: **LEGISLATURES · UNIONS · EMPLOYERS · COMPETITION AUTHORITIES** · DEEP DIVE: VOL 02

The pattern across the eight is deliberate: none requires forecasting which jobs survive, and none bets the workforce on a single scenario. Every move raises absorption capacity, improves the quality of adoption decisions, or widens a dividend channel — investments that pay off in the gradual world, the managed world, and the compressed one alike. In a transition whose speed nobody can promise, robustness is the only responsible strategy.

07

Worker's toolkit: the seven questions

Every workforce facing an AI adoption plan should be able to ask these seven questions and recognize a good answer. They compress this report into a form that fits on one page and works in one meeting.

THE QUESTION	A GOOD ANSWER CONTAINS	THE RED FLAG
1 · Which of our tasks does this take on — and which remain ours?	A task-level inventory shared with staff: what is absorbed, what changes, what is new.	"Roles are unaffected" — with no task analysis attached.
2 · Augment or replace — measured how?	Explicit augmentation metrics: output and quality per worker, error rates, worker verdicts.	A business case whose only line is headcount.
3 · What skills does it demand, and who is trained first?	Funded training in paid hours, offered first to the most-affected workers.	"Resources are available online."
4 · What happens to the time it saves?	A reinvestment plan agreed before launch — quality, backlog, new services — named and owned.	Savings booked before redeployment is designed.
5 · What does it monitor, and who monitors the monitoring?	A published data map, off-limits zones, retention limits, worker access to their own scores.	Manager-only dashboards; scoring nobody can explain.
6 · If displacement happens anyway, what is the bridge?	Notice, wage insurance, placement support, credential funding — in writing, pre-deployment.	A severance table, discovered on announcement day.
7 · Where does our share of the gains show up?	A named channel: the wage schedule, hours, prices, or a profit pool with a formula.	"Reinvestment in growth," with no line item.

The battery has a second use, facing the other direction: an employer who can answer all seven in writing has, in the process, done the workforce planning that separates augmentation success from expensive failure — the due-diligence logic Volume 10 hands to

boards. Question 4 is the quiet crux: organizations that decide in advance what freed hours are *for* get compounding capability; those that let the hours evaporate get a smaller payroll and the same backlog.

WHERE TO GO NEXT IN THE SERIES

Readers tracing the dividend to its source should read Volume 02 (the abundance economics) next; those designing the rules, Volume 04. Boards and executives making adoption decisions get their own playbook in Volume 10, and the deployment-safety floor that keeps augmented systems trustworthy is Volume 06. The information environment workers organize within is Volume 09's subject. One transition, ten vantage points.



Fair Artificial Intelligence Research Labs (FAIR Labs) is an independent research institute working to ensure that advanced artificial intelligence is developed safely, governed wisely, and shared fairly. Through rigorous technical research, policy analysis, and public engagement, FAIR Labs works with scientists, governments, companies, and communities to widen the circle of people who benefit from — and have a say in — the most consequential technology of our time.

The **Frontier Series** is FAIR Labs' flagship collection of stakeholder briefings on advanced AI — one shared evidence base, ten vantage points. Each volume stands alone; together they form a common map for scientists, executives, policymakers, workers, and citizens navigating the same transition.

VOL 01 · The Safety Horizon

VOL 02 · The Abundance Dividend

VOL 03 · Atlas of AI Risk

VOL 04 · Governing the Frontier

VOL 05 · The Alignment Agenda

VOL 06 · When Systems Can't Fail

VOL 07 · The Compute Compact

VOL 08 · Work in the Age of Cognition

VOL 09 · The Trust Infrastructure

VOL 10 · The Director's Dilemma