

A man with a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark trousers, is walking down a modern office staircase. He is carrying a cardboard box filled with office supplies, including a potted plant, a blue folder, and some papers. Two humanoid robots, white with blue accents and glowing blue eyes, are walking up the stairs behind him. The background shows a modern office environment with glass railings and a city skyline visible through the windows.

Roger
CAMRASS

BEYOND THE CAREER

WORK, IDENTITY
AND PURPOSE IN THE
INTELLIGENT ERA

AI and the Human Experience
Fifth Research Briefing

A summary of the discussion

10 September 2026



INTRODUCTION



When machines can do the work, a career must mean something else

The fifth briefing in the AI and the Human Experience series asked what becomes of the career for two centuries the central scaffolding of adult life as artificial intelligence reaches into cognitive work at every stage. Pairing a conceptual pre-read with a discussion among some thirty contributors, it followed AI's effect across the whole arc of a working life, from a first rung that is vanishing to a retirement that is dissolving, and pressed a single question: when doing is no longer the organising principle of a life, what is?

In Conversation

During our fifth research briefing, three distinguished voices helped us to explore this terrain. Their dialogue, enriched by an engaged community of some twenty thought leaders, revealed an urgent need for new approaches to career planning and development in the Intelligent Era. The Panel included:

Andrea Parry-Clarke

Partner, Chief AI Officer,
and Head of AI, Data & Technology Practice, EKIM Consulting

Dr John Neill

Former Chair and Chief
Executive of the Unipart
Group

Joshua Saffrin Betesh

Senior Consultant,
Behavioural Sciences, Ipsos

For most of the modern era the career has done quiet, heavy work. We prepare for an occupation, enter it near the bottom, acquire expertise by doing, climb through a sequence of rising responsibility, and eventually retire. Along the way the career bundles together three things that are not the same: work, income, and identity and purpose. It is the machine that distributes not only earnings but status, belonging and a good part of the answer to the question “who are you?” Artificial intelligence now threatens to unpick that bundle and, more unsettling still, to do so at both ends of working life at once.

This was the third movement in an argument the group has been building through the year. In April, *A New Vocabulary for the Intelligent Era* set out the shift from productivity to presence, from doing to being, from intelligence to wisdom. In June, *From Knowing to Becoming* carried the question into education, concluding that when a machine can supply competent answers on demand, the purpose of learning must move from the transfer of knowledge to the formation of judgement, character and the capacity to author one’s own life. That evening ended by asking how education might produce a self-authoring generation. This briefing asked the sequel: what kind of working life will that generation have to author? What follows weaves the pre-read, the discussion and recent evidence into a single account.

Table 1 – The career across the life course

Stage	The shift AI forces
Entry (20s) – The vanishing first rung	AI absorbs the junior tasks through which novices once became experts.
Progression (30s–40s) – The squeezed middle	Flattening compresses the very management layers that once trained judgement.
Expertise (40s–50s) – The expertise paradox	The deeper the expertise, the sharper the disruption when AI makes it abundant.
Late career (60s+) – The longevity paradox	Working lives lengthen as the half-life of skills shortens; retirement dissolves into contribution.
The safeguard – The AI Mirror	A companion that reflects potential, disciplined by one rule: systems suggest, but humans decide.

01:

The unbundling of work, income and identity

The pre-read opened on a deceptively simple observation: industrial society fused work, income and identity into a single structure, and AI is beginning to pull them apart. As machines absorb both routine and advanced cognitive work, that tight integration loosens and the question ceases to be merely economic and becomes existential. If paid employment no longer distributes status, community and meaning as well as money, are we entering a period of unprecedented liberation, or one in which people are left unmoored, stripped of the scaffolding a career once supplied? Daniel Susskind's *A World Without Work* framed the mechanism technology reducing the demand for human labour one task at a time but the group was clear that the deeper disturbance is to identity, not to output.

The discussion refused an easy answer. Several contributors reached for historical scale: this is a transition on the order of the move from agriculture to industry, one participant argued, but compressed into a fraction of the time an equal, perhaps greater, challenge arriving far faster. Another put the human difficulty starkly: machines will advance quickly, and people will have to evolve alongside them to stay relevant, a strain on human adaptation with little precedent. The unbundling is not a distant thought experiment; it is a live pressure on people who must remake themselves mid-stride.

Research suggests LLM capabilities double every 12-18 months, while hardware advances will deliver order-of-magnitude efficiency improvements by 2030.

“ This is an equal, if not greater, challenge than the shift from agriculture to industry and in a far more compressed period. ”

02:

The vanishing first rung

Nowhere is the change further advanced than at the entry point, and here the evidence has caught up with the argument. Stanford's Digital Economy Lab, tracking millions of payroll records, finds employment for 22- to 25-year-olds in the most AI-exposed occupations now running some nineteen per cent below where it would be had it kept pace with less-exposed peers a gap that appears in reduced hiring rather than redundancy, and that experienced workers in the same occupations do not share. In the United Kingdom, the vacancy data tell the same story: graduate recruitment at leading employers has fallen by roughly a quarter over three years, and most employers now expect AI to reshape graduate and apprentice roles. Big-tech new-graduate hiring has dropped to a small fraction of intake, well below pre-pandemic levels, and Brookings estimates AI could perform more than half the tasks in entry-level roles several times the exposure of senior ones.

The mechanism is the one the June briefing named, and this one inherited: the Experience Paradox. The junior tasks AI absorbs first research, first drafts, basic coding, administration were precisely the rungs by which novices climbed toward mastery. Remove them and the pipeline that turns beginners into seasoned experts is quietly cut. The group pressed the corollary hard, because it is where philosophy meets the balance sheet. Natasha Davydova's formulation from her written response framed the evening's sharpest question: who pays to build tomorrow's judgement, and by when? Firms tolerated junior inefficiency for a century as an investment in training; when AI makes that investment look unnecessary in the short run, someone must still fund the practice that produces judgement. One participant sharpened the point to a present, practical worry: HR training budgets in the United Kingdom are being cut rapidly at the very moment the workforce most needs to learn to deploy AI tools so who, in the end, pays?

There were more hopeful readings too. AI may open new routes even as it closes old ones: from the bottom up, a demand for “AI trainers” and something like AI apprenticeships; from the top down, a growing stack of large problems care for an ageing population, feeding and powering a larger world, the climate that will pull in new skills and new roles. The rapid expansion of the AI sector itself, from models to the hyperscalers and the people who maintain them, is already a new market for talent. The consensus was not that graduate work disappears, but that it is being redesigned, and that the route in is changing first.

“ Who pays to build tomorrow’s judgement, and by when? ”



03:

The squeezed middle

If the first rung is thinning, the layer above it is being compressed. As AI absorbs the coordination, reporting and monitoring that once filled a manager's day, organisations are asking how many layers of middle management they still need. Gartner projects that by 2026, one in five organisations will use AI to flatten their structure, removing more than half of current middle-management positions; surveys already find around two in five employees reporting that their employer has stripped out management layers in the past year, and the average number of direct reports per manager has widened by twenty per cent in a single year. The middle, historically the safest place to sit, is no longer.

The paradox the group drew out is that AI may make good managers more valuable even as it lets organisations employ fewer of them. The human work that remains motivating people, resolving conflict, coaching, carrying accountability, knowing when not to follow the machine is exactly what resists automation, while the informational scaffolding around it is exactly what does not. One contributor pointed to a capability that barely existed a year ago and may soon be central: managing an agentic AI workforce, in which a team leader directs a majority of machine "workers" rather than human staff. The ladder, several agreed, is becoming both shorter and faster: a capable thirty-year-old with a fleet of AI agents can now produce what once took a sizeable team exhilarating for that individual, but hollowing for the rungs that used to sit beneath them.

4.0:

From doing to deciding

Underneath the stage-by-stage disruption, the discussion kept returning to a single pivot: as analysis becomes cheap, the human premium moves from doing to deciding. When a machine can generate options, write code, retrieve research, and draft analysis in seconds, possessing information is no longer a competitive moat. What becomes scarce is answerability the willingness to frame the problem, judge among options, commit to a path and carry personal responsibility for the outcome. Intelligence proposes options; judgement closes them.

This reframing ran through many of the evening's contributions, and it exposed an awkward institutional lag. Promotion, one participant observed, has always rewarded well-measured things analytical ability above all. If judgement is now the scarce capacity, how do we measure it, and promote for it? Boards, another noted, still recruit on past performance and accumulated experience when the new era rewards future potential; a candidate who lists a completed system implementation at the top of their credentials may be advertising precisely the codified competence the machine has absorbed. Yet the group was equally clear that judgement is not conjured from nothing. Practice working through complex, messy, real situations remains the crucible in which it forms; machines can lay out the options, but people must decide and be accountable. And judgement rests on something machines conspicuously lack: a value system. AI can assimilate information and generate a range of outcomes, but choosing among them is an act of values, not computation, which is why the human capacity to judge, and to answer for the choice, is the part that does not commoditise.

**“Machines will provide the options;
people must decide and be accountable.”**

05:

The expertise paradox

The disruption does not stop at mid-career; it reaches the expert. Unlike earlier waves of automation, generative AI reaches directly into professional, non-routine cognitive work the International Labour Organisation estimates that around a third of employment in high-income countries has some exposure which means the highly educated older professional is not automatically the safest. The pre-read named the resulting difficulty **the Expertise Paradox**: the more of one's identity and economic value is invested in a specific body of expertise, the more disorienting it is when AI makes parts of that expertise abundant. Someone who spent twenty years acquiring a specialism may watch a machine replicate its core in months; and reskilling a mid-career professional is harder than training a novice, precisely because of that deep identity lock-in. The World Economic Forum's estimate that two in five core skills will be disrupted by 2030, with many workers needing to retrain, is no abstraction for these people: it is a personal reckoning.

Two anxieties surfaced here that belong squarely to a programme about the human experience. The first was cognitive: if we hand our analytical work to machines, do we risk a kind of brain atrophy, losing capacities such as memory, synthesis, and sustained reasoning that made us useful? It is the "cognitive debt" the June briefing found in the classroom, now carried into professional life. The second was subtler: the risk of complacency and fatigue. One professor wondered aloud how we keep a fresh mind amid relentless AI developments, neither obsessed nor numbed, when the pace itself becomes exhausting. Both point the same way: the challenge for the established professional is less "AI will take my job" than "AI will change my job faster than I can, or want to, change myself."

06:

The longevity paradox and the dissolving of retirement

At the far end of working life, two forces are moving in opposite directions. People are working longer: in Britain the employment rate of those in their early sixties has climbed from about a third in the mid-1990s to nearly three-fifths, the state pension age is rising, and Bain projects that some 150 million jobs will shift to workers over 55 by 2030, with the over-55s making up more than a quarter of the G7 workforce by 2031. At the very moment careers are lengthening, the useful half-life of career-specific expertise is shrinking. We are, in the pre-read's phrase, extending working lives exactly as technology shortens the life of what we know.



Out of that collision, the discussion drew a more hopeful possibility: the dissolution of retirement itself into something richer. The rigid industrial sequence: education, then employment, then a hard stop, is giving way to fluid, overlapping lives. AI, which absorbs the administrative preparation, retrieval, and analysis, could let experienced people stay productive without recreating the intensity of a full-time career: a portfolio of part-time work, mentoring, advising, teaching, civic contribution, and continued learning, in which the human supplies experience, relationships, judgement, and wisdom. The programme has a name for this a prolonged period of contribution in place of retirement and it maps neatly onto the deeper doing-to-being arc. The caution is real: adoption among older workers still lags their juniors, and the barrier is more often access and invitation than capacity, since only a small minority report genuine difficulty with the tools. Meeting people where they are, rather than assuming either fragility or fluency, is the practical task.

07:

The mirror, not the master

Beneath every stage lay a question about the technology's proper posture, and here the briefing returned to the image that has run through the whole series: the AI as a mirror. Rightly directed, a personal AI could become a lifelong vocational companion reflecting not only what someone has done but what they might yet become, helping them navigate transitions no career adviser could foresee across a fifty-year working life. Wrongly directed, the same system could quietly decide which skills we acquire, which opportunities we are shown and which paths appear open at all. And it matters, the group noted, whose mirror it is: a career AI supplied by an employer, by the state or by a marketplace will each narrow the field of view in its own direction.

The safeguard the series settled on in June held here with added force: systems suggest, but humans decide, but the discussion refused to let it stay a slogan. If the system shapes the very set of options from which we choose, then choosing among its suggestions is a thin kind of agency; the harder, more important task is to keep the shaping itself in human hands. One omission in today's AI models drew particular attention: their lack of genuine empathy. Could future, more capable systems close that gap and would we want them to, or is empathy precisely the human contribution a mirror should reflect rather than replace? The room did not resolve it, but the framing was agreed: AI in a working life should amplify agency, not substitute for it.

“ Systems suggest, but humans decide
yet if the system shapes the options, the real
task is to keep the decisions in human hands. ”

08:

The wider frame, and what comes next

Two contextual notes gave the evening its ballast. The first was national: AI's effect on work will not fall evenly across countries. The United Kingdom, one participant argued, is largely a service economy with little domestic AI industry, while the United States commands much of the supply side; a service economy could find itself a net loser as the value accrues elsewhere. The corollary for the young was blunt and practical: keep your options wide, look internationally to escape national lethargy, and hold on to real industry knowledge, which remains the ground on which judgement is built. The second was economic: investment in AI is running at something over a trillion a year: a sum that only makes sense if it drives rapid, broad-based growth. Whether that growth materialises, and whether its gains are widely shared or narrowly captured, is the backdrop against which every question about careers will be answered.

It would be wrong to end on determinism. The most substantial counter-case, argued by the economist David Autor, is that AI need not hollow out work at all: used well, it could democratise expertise, extending the judgement-laden work now reserved for elite professionals to a far wider group with foundational training, and rebuilding the middle that earlier automation stripped out. Autor is careful that this is a possibility, not a prophecy: which path we take depends on how the tools are designed, deployed and governed. That, in the end, was the mood of the room: not that the machines will decide our working future, but that we will, through the choices we make now about how to build them, how to pay for the learning they displace, and how to measure the human qualities they cannot supply.

Toward a self-authoring working life

The industrial age asked how to prepare human beings to serve economic systems. The Intelligent Era asks something harder and more hopeful: how to build meaningful lives when work no longer supplies, on its own, the structure of identity, income and purpose it once did. The career as we inherited it may be dissolving; what replaces it is not yet written. The task ahead, and the theme of the briefings to come, is to write it deliberately, so that a technology built to reflect our thinking is never quietly permitted to do our thinking for us. As ever, my thanks to the contributors whose insight made the evening what it was.

“ The career we inherited is dissolving;
what replaces it is not yet written and
that is precisely the work ahead. ”

About the programme

In 2025, Roger Camrass launched AI and the Human Experience, a global research programme supported by a community of contributors worldwide. Through bi-monthly briefings and a series of reports, it examines how artificial intelligence is reshaping every dimension of human life and how we might steer it toward the greater good. You can find more details and the full library of reports at rogercamrass.com

Over half a century, Roger has advised governments on the strategic impact of technology, led a global multi-client programme, Business in the Third Millennium, and was research director of the Judge Business School survey into Corporate Innovation. He has held part-time academic posts at several universities and business schools and today holds a visiting professorship in the humanities department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is married with three children and resides in Highgate, North London.

Sources and further reading

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Roger Camrass
Researcher Director

As a pioneer of today's Internet at MIT in the seventies, Roger has spent over half a century advising Fortune 1000 companies and national governments on the strategic impact of technology. During the nineties, he led a global study to evaluate the impact of digital technology on corporate structures and performance called 'Business in the Third Millennium'. In 2025, he launched a new programme on 'How AI might enhance the Human Experience'.

In parallel with his commercial career, Roger has held visiting professorships at several universities, including Bristol, Cambridge, and Surrey in the UK, and ESADE in Spain. Currently, he is a visiting professor of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he is overseeing a change programme in Digital Humanities. Roger lives in Highgate, North London, with his wife, Susan, and their Labrador, Rocco.

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