Institute of Internal Communication

Working the future
INSIGHT • STRATEGY • CHANGE

OCTOBER 2025

IC TRENDS REPORT

Emergent work trends reshaping internal communication

Executive summary

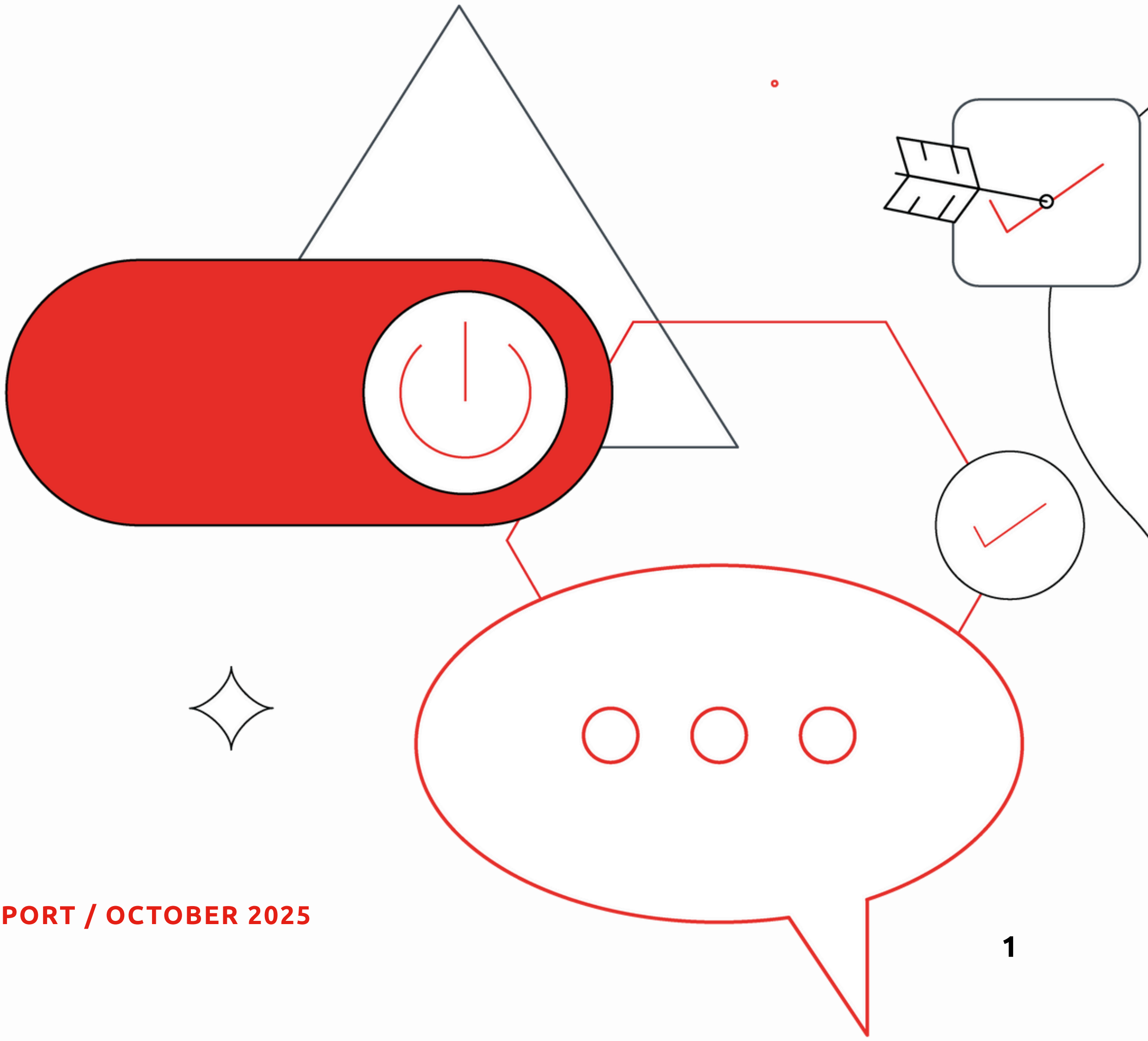
Internal communicators are the new power players

As global stability deteriorates, anxiety is on the rise. Organisations must assimilate the wants, needs and expectations of **increasingly diverse internal stakeholders**.

Only then can they **harness the full potential of colleagues across the spectrum**, who are pushing back on top-down, centralised and increasingly outdated, command-and-control management archetypes.

In this mercurial new landscape, **internal communication is a meta-skill that increasingly underpins organisational success**.

Our monthly trend reports help internal communication professionals **stay informed and think more expansively about ways they can deliver strategic value.**



AI & Tech

AI 'workslop' is undermining workplace productivity and trust

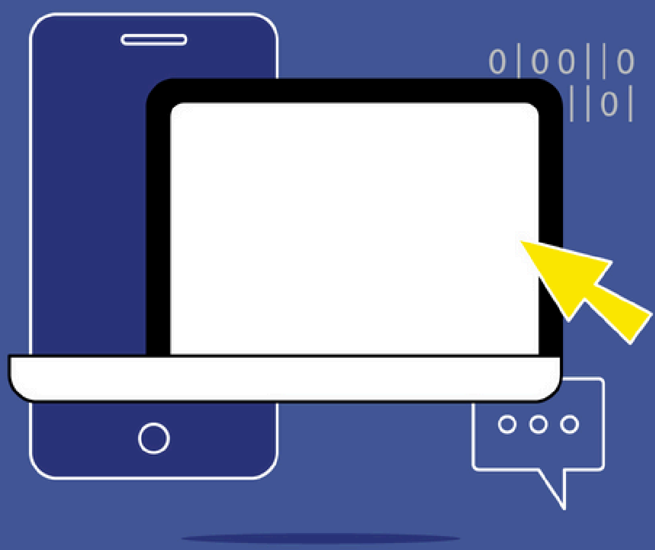
AI adoption at work has doubled since 2023, yet **a whopping 95% of organisations have yet to see any measurable ROI**. The problem? **'Workslop' – AI-generated content that looks professional at first glance but lacks substance**, forcing colleagues to spend time decoding, correcting or simply redoing it.

Workslop's impact is significant: 40% of employees have encountered it in the past month, with each incident costing nearly two hours of productivity. For a 10,000-person organisation, that mounts up to £7 million in annual losses.

Beyond the financial toll, **workslop damages workplace relationships**, with **recipients viewing senders as less capable, creative and trustworthy**.

And clearly there are trust issues associated with the technology and its outputs. Recent research reveals a paradox: those with lower AI literacy view the technology more favourably,

Despite growing wariness amongst more informed users, AI companies continue to portray their offerings as a mesmerising, revolutionary inflection point for humanity.



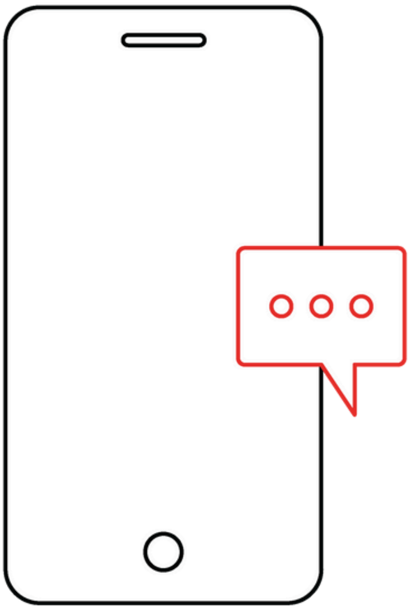
whilst **trust actually diminishes as knowledge increases**. Meanwhile, **'AI veganism'** is emerging – **people who distrust AI and abstain from it for ethical, environmental or wellbeing concerns.**

As AI becomes more pervasive and impactful, **building trust through thoughtful design and transparency is essential**. Rather than avoiding negative outcomes, we must actively create systems that listen, respond appropriately and maintain accuracy – ensuring we're building a better future for all stakeholders.

To address this, **organisations should provide clear guidance rather than blanket AI mandates**, encourage a 'pilot' mindset for purposeful AI use, and **position AI as a collaborative tool requiring thoughtful application** – not a shortcut.

40%

of employees have received workslop in the past month



2 hours

of lost productivity from each workslop incident

95%

of organisations have yet to see any measurable ROI from AI

£7 million

estimated annual cost of workslop for 10,000-person organisation

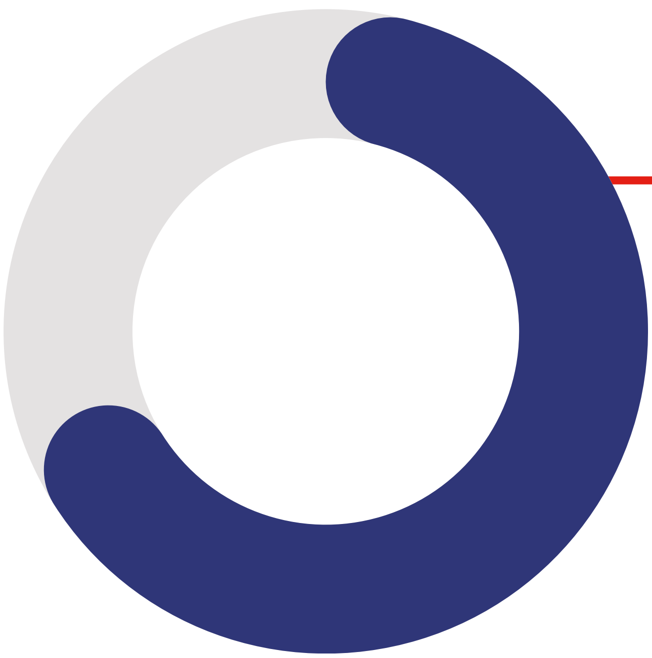
The emergent perils of AEO - answer engine optimisation

As AI systems increasingly replace traditional search with direct answers, a **new threat is emerging: answer engine optimisation (AEO).** Unlike SEO, which simply influenced rankings, **AEO shapes the answers themselves** – and it behoves organisations to understand the profound risks this presents.

When AI delivers a single definitive answer rather than multiple sources, whoever manipulates that system essentially controls perceived reality. Research indicates that roughly 70% of people accept information they're generally presented with at face value without verification – and that potentially creates a **perfect storm where optimised answers become accepted truth, regardless of their provenance or accuracy**.

AEO operates through fundamentally opaque systems – proprietary training data, sealed algorithms and black-box reasoning. Our individual organisations cannot audit how conclusions have been reached or identify what has been excluded.

This **opacity eliminates accountability whilst concentrating enormous power in the hands of the few platforms controlling optimisation**, of course.



70%

of people accept information they're presented with at face value

Legal frameworks are exacerbating these risks. Platforms generating AI answers may claim immunity under the US' Section 230 protections designed for neutral intermediaries, despite now functioning as active content authors. **Responsibility hasn't kept pace with reality-shaping power**.

Even detection systems offer little comfort. Recent research demonstrates that **deepfake detectors can be systematically compromised to mislabel manipulated content as authentic**.

Organisations must respond proactively. Demand genuine explainability, provenance and audit trails – not as exercises in public relations but as essential infrastructure. Build human judgement into critical processes. Challenge any system claiming neutrality whilst actively curating information.

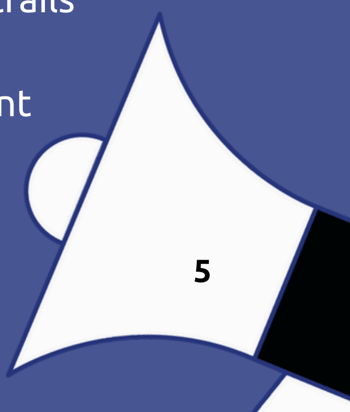
The fundamental question isn't whether AEO will affect our organisations – it's whether we're prepared to let someone else's agenda potentially optimise our individual reality.

IC challenges

- Workslop undermining productivity and workplace trust significantly
- AI literacy paradox reducing trust amongst informed users
- Answer engine optimisation and manipulation shaping perceived reality
- Opaque AI systems eliminating accountability and transparency

Strategic responses

- Provide clear guidance rather than blanket AI mandates
- Position AI as collaborative tool requiring diligent leverage
- Encourage colleagues to probe explainability, provenance and comprehensive audit trails
- Build human judgement into all critical processes



Sustainability

Some green shoots of optimism on the transition to sustainable energy

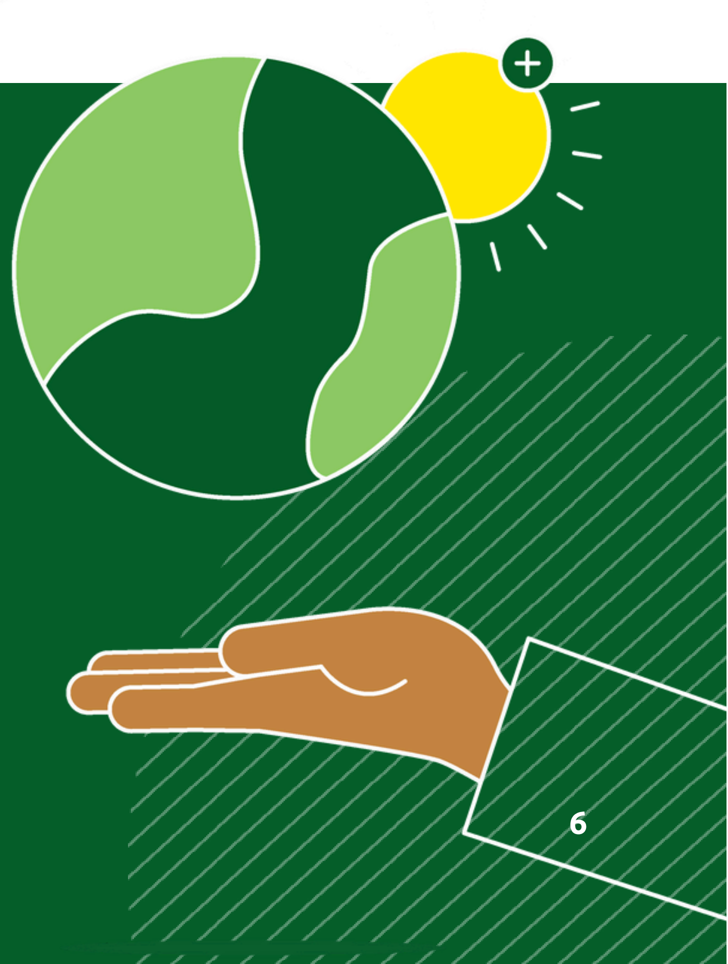
Global renewable energy has reached an **historic milestone in 2025, with wind and solar generation surpassing coal-fired electricity** for the first time.

Solar power surged nearly a third in the first half of 2025 compared to 2024, meeting 83% of rising global electricity demand, whilst wind grew just over 7%. **China and India led this expansion**, with China adding more capacity than the rest of the world combined and India growing renewables three times faster than its electricity demand.

The International Energy Agency projects **global renewable capacity could more than double by the decade's end**.

Looking ahead, **space-based solar panels could potentially slash Europe's terrestrial renewable requirements by 80% by 2050**, reducing power system costs by 15% and battery usage by over two-thirds, though implementation costs remain prohibitive for at least two decades.

“Something is working” – UN climate chief Simon Stiell is cautiously optimistic about global climate progress, noting we're moving in the right direction – albeit slowly.



The economic case for green transition is strengthening dramatically: private investment in clean energy reached $2tn last year, double the $1tn going into fossil fuels.

China exemplifies this opportunity, with renewables generating a quarter of electricity, electric vehicles capturing 50% market share and low-carbon exports worth $177bn.

However, inaction carries catastrophic costs – climate damage already runs to hundreds of billions annually, with projections suggesting costs exceeding 5% of GDP within a decade – an unprecedented ongoing recession.

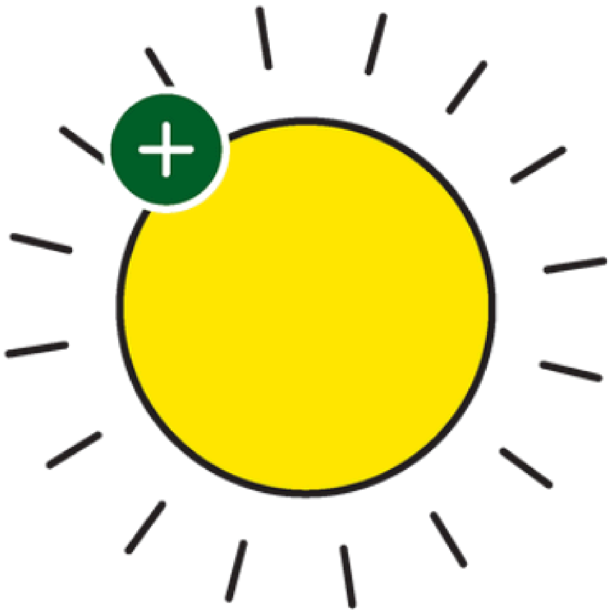
A message is emerging: those **embracing green transformation** are likely to reap **substantial economic rewards**, whilst those delaying risk potential longer-term issues with business sustainability.

83%

of rising global electricity demand met by solar in 2025 – overtaking coal

80%

proportion of Europe's renewable energy needs that could be met by space-based solar panels by 2050



$2 trillion

private investment in clean energy last year

Climate crisis set to raise consumer prices and impact GDP

Climate change is squeezing both consumers and businesses through what the European Central Bank terms **"climateflation"** – inflation driven by extreme weather that disrupts both food and commodity production.

The UK faces particular vulnerability, because it imports nearly half its food. Storms and floods caused a 12% drop in vegetable production during 2023, whilst food prices are projected to rise 34% over 25 years.

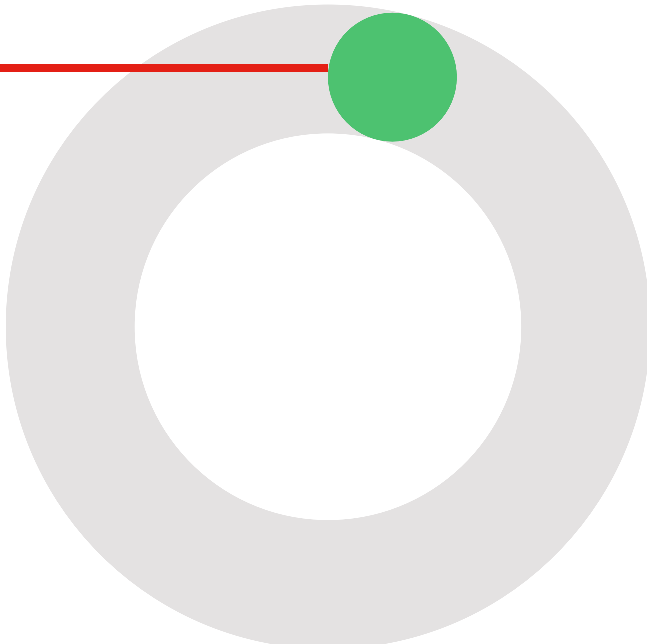
Globally, **annual food inflation could increase by up to 3.2% yearly over the coming decade**.

This crisis hits hard: **86% of UK consumers worry about grocery inflation, with 66% buying less**. Even wine prices are affected – hotter temperatures produce stronger wines, pushing them into higher tax bands where 14.5% ABV bottles face 80% price increases under new duty rules.

Beyond consumer impact, **British experts warn that nature degradation could slash UK GDP by nearly 5% by the end of the decade**, adding to existing challenges like Brexit uncertainty, rising taxes and productivity issues.

5%

potential hit to UK GDP by end of 2020s through nature degradation



However, there are glimmers of hope. Research from the Green Finance Institute and WWF shows that **investing in nature can boost company profits whilst meeting climate targets**.

Construction firm Wates Group is increasing wildlife on sites by 20% and seeking greener supply chain solutions. First Milk's 700 regenerative dairy farmers earned members an extra £5,200 each in 2023 – roughly 7% of average farm income.

This shift towards more nature-positive business practices could signal a fundamental transformation in how we all work. Companies will increasingly need environmental specialists, sustainability consultants and green technology experts. Traditional roles will evolve to incorporate environmental considerations, whilst entirely new related careers will emerge.

Private investment in nature is increasingly crucial for economic growth – and **the companies embracing green action plans with genuine commitment to reduced emissions are set to navigate these turbulent markets most successfully.**

IC challenges

- Communicating potential climate cost impacts on future turnover whilst maintaining morale
- 'Climateflation' impacting colleague cost-of-living and inflation concerns
- Demonstrating genuine green commitment
- Preparing colleagues for fundamental sustainability-driven transformation

Strategic responses

- Frame climate action as competitive advantage with tangible business benefits
- Acknowledge cost-of-living pressures and highlight company any financial wellbeing initiatives
- Share measurable sustainability progress with transparent data and metrics
- Communicate emerging skills needs and evolving role requirements early

Employment

Welcome to the age of the polyworker and the double-dipper

The traditional nine-to-five job continues to evolve. An increasing number of employees now juggle multiple roles simultaneously – a practice known as **'polyworking'**. According to a 2025 survey by Monster, **nearly half of US employees now have a second income stream**, combining full-time roles with freelance projects or managing several part-time gigs.

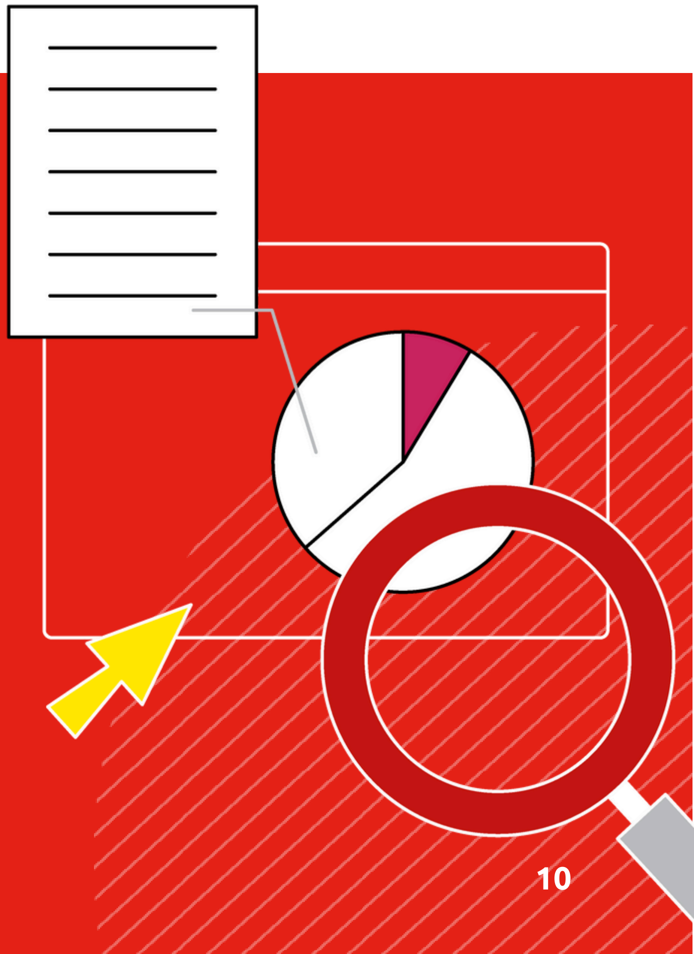
Some workers even hold two full-time jobs at once, something known as **'double-dipping'**.

McKinsey estimates **double-dippers** to be **around 5% of the workforce in a typical organisation**.

And these aren't merely passing shifts and undercurrents; they're **reshaping fundamental assumptions about workplace loyalty and productivity**.

So why are employees polyworking? The motivations are twofold. **For many, it's financial necessity** driven by rising living costs and the flexibility of remote work.

Why are colleagues polyworking? For many, it's financial necessity driven by rising living costs and the flexibility of remote work. For others, it's led by ambition.



A 2025 Academized survey found that 52% of millennial employees work side hustles to supplement their income, earning an average of $12,689 (£9,410) annually from additional roles – sometimes as much as $45,000 (£33,373). According to 41% of polyworkers surveyed, these extra jobs have reduced their financial stress.

For others, it's about ambition. The same survey revealed that 45% of millennial workers pursue extra work to follow personal interests or advance their careers. **Digital and AI tools make managing multiple roles increasingly feasible**, particularly in software development, social media management and data analysis.

However, **polyworking often brings with it stress, burnout risk and reduced focus.** These complications are intensified when employees hide additional work from employers.

52%

of US millennials work side hustles to supplement their income

41%

of polyworkers say their extra jobs have reduced their financial stress

45%

of millennials pursue extra work to follow personal interests or advance their careers

Move over, job-hopping – 'job-hugging' is the emerging workplace trend

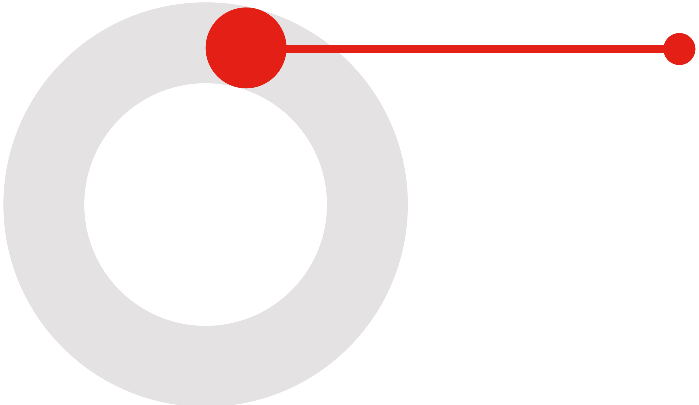
Switching roles for higher salaries was once deemed a lucrative career strategy, but the financial benefits have diminished significantly.

In 2025, job hoppers see only a 4.8% pay rise compared to 4.6% for those who stay put, making the difference pretty negligible.

This shift has given rise to **'job hugging' – employees clinging to their current positions rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere**.

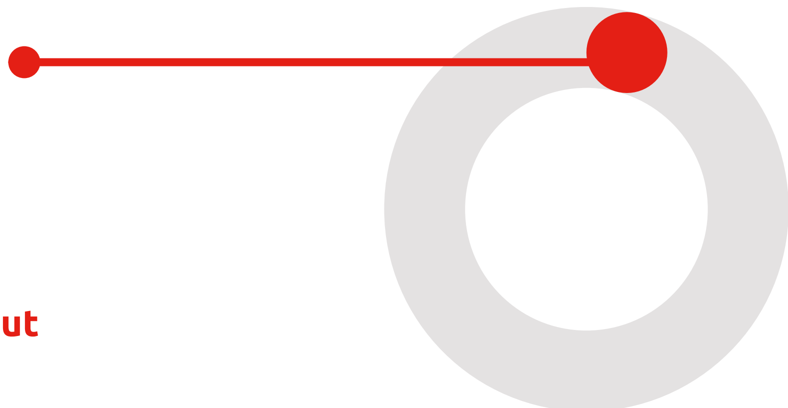
Several factors are driving this emergent behaviour:

- The pay gap between switching jobs and staying has almost disappeared
- Today's brutal job market makes finding new roles more difficult
- Staying offers comparable financial benefits with greater security
- Long-term loyalty now provides stronger benefits packages and promotion prospects



4.8%

percentage pay rise job-hoppers see in 2025...



4.6%

... versus percentage pay rise for those who stay put

Whilst **job-hugging offers advantages like stable growth, deeper expertise and better advancement opportunities**, it carries risks too.

Employees may experience slower pay progression, professional stagnation and fewer chances to develop new skills or expand their networks.

As with most things, the key is balance, of course: whilst job-hopping can broaden experience and connections, frequent moves may signal commitment issues.

IC challenges

- Financial pressures drive workers towards undisclosed side hustles
- Colleagues juggling multiple roles simultaneously experience reduced workplace focus
- Remote work flexibility enables concealed polyworking arrangements
- Double-dipping employees risk burnout and divided loyalties

Strategic responses

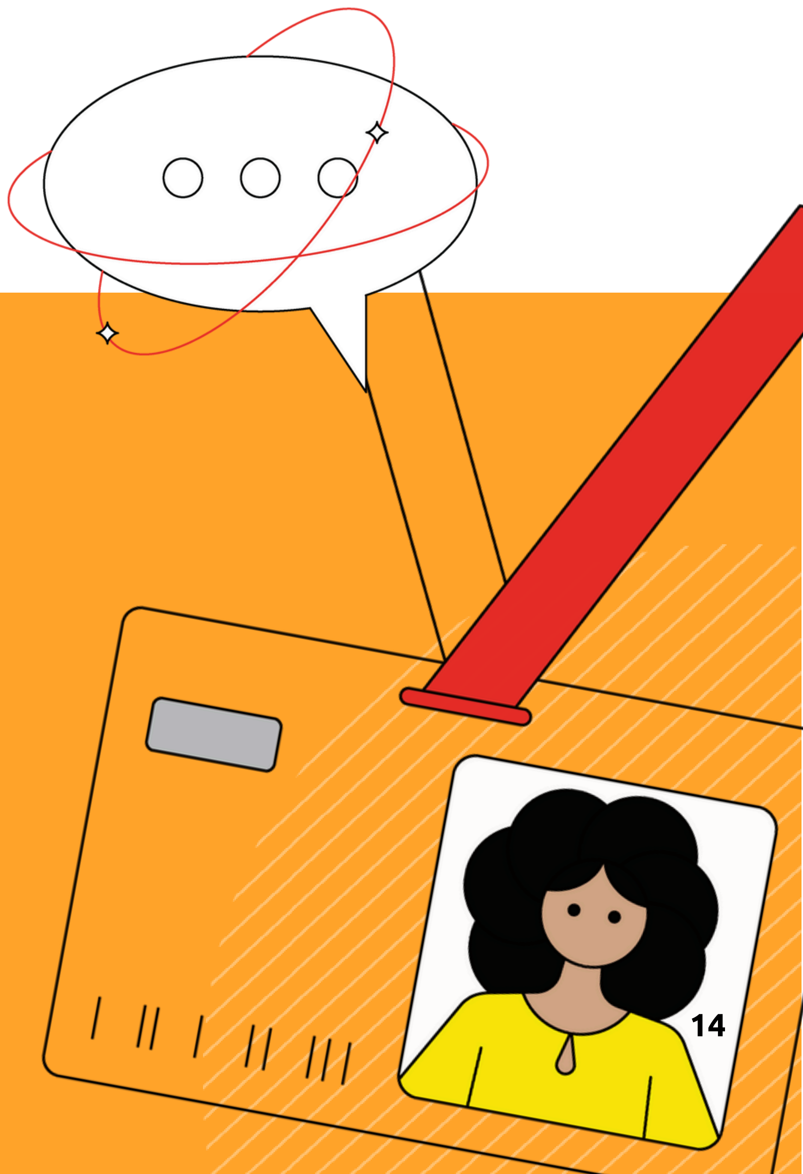
- Foster open dialogue about capacity and time management
- Communicate available financial wellbeing resources and support programmes
- Build trust through transparent conversations about work arrangements
- Reinforce organisational values emphasising mutual trust and honesty

People

Modern workplaces face a perfect storm of burnout-inducing pressures that demand urgent attention

The **burgeoning burnout crisis** demands urgent intervention. **Middle managers are especially at risk:** 71% feel overwhelmed, rising to 75% for those under 35. Trapped between leadership directives and team expectations with limited authority, many also experience the **'sandwich squeeze'– managing work whilst caring for children and elderly parents.**

Microsoft's research reveals what it calls **the "infinite workday" phenomenon:** employees receive 117 emails and 153 Teams messages daily, facing interruptions every two minutes. **Half of all meetings occur during peak productivity hours** (9–11am and 1–3pm), destroying focus time. **Evening work has surged 16%** year-on-year, with over 50 after-hours messages sent daily, whilst nearly 20% check emails before weekend noon. **One-third report this pace is unsustainable.**



Just as the 'sandwich squeeze' cohort is trying to navigate the chaos of the 'infinite workday', some Silicon Valley companies are rolling out the '996' working week.

Meanwhile, **Silicon Valley start-ups are increasingly adopting the '996' culture – working 9am to 9pm, six days weekly** – creating 72-hour workweeks. Workers subjected to this fear a **deterioration in output quality** and an **exodus of talent**. Many organisations impose these hours without compensation or warning; one California employee successfully sued after being forced into 72-hour weeks without contract amendments.

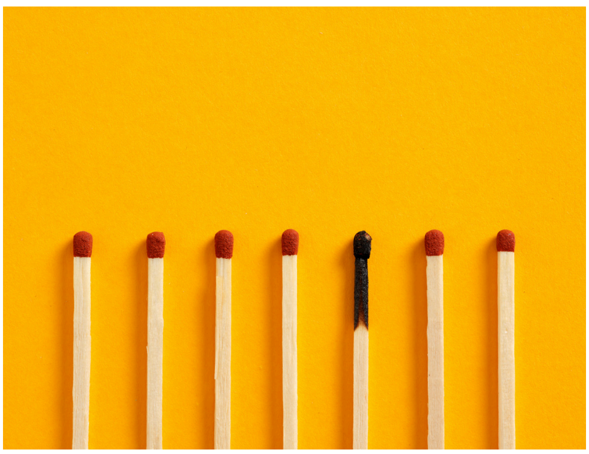
Employees experiencing 996 work describe creative cultures turning hostile, with pointless late-night meetings where productivity and engagement take a hit. Even China – not known for being progressive in this area – has abandoned 996 practices.

996 won't necessarily take root far beyond the confines of 'tech bro' culture, of course. But without proper regulation, fair compensation and adequate leave, **these trends threaten colleague wellbeing and organisational sustainability**. Future work solutions require fundamentally reimagining work rhythms – and not the acceleration of systems that are no longer fit for purpose.

The chaos of the 'infinite workday'...

57%

proportion of meetings that are *ad hoc*



117

average emails received per employee each workday

153

average Teams messages received per work day

2 mins.

average time between interruptions by a meeting, e-mail or message during work hours

Paradoxically, Gen X may yet emerge as the beneficiaries of the AI employment revolution

Whilst older workers reportedly face AI recruitment bias, mid-career professionals already in senior positions may enjoy greater protection than their junior counterparts, who will shoulder this workplace disruptor's primary impact.

AI demands experience and maturity – it's not simply a tool, but a reflection that mirrors the data and judgements we supply. **This makes emotional intelligence, ethical oversight and comprehensive contextual understanding vital** for purposeful implementation. Gen X, having witnessed the technology transformation from internet dial-up to deep machine learning, possesses this maturity – and also knows how to navigate chaos.

Meanwhile, **Gen Z graduates are facing a devastating reality: university degrees no longer guarantee prosperity.**

As AI consumes roles from computer programmers to junior financial analysts, we're seeing **entry-level opportunities contract, disadvantaging younger workers.**

LinkedIn chief executive Ryan Roslansky recently delivered a sobering message for this cohort: **the future belongs not to those holding prestigious degrees, but to flexible, AI-literate talent prepared to adopt new tools**.

As AI increasingly supplants entry-level positions, **conventional qualifications look set to diminish in value**. Business leaders are also questioning degrees' merit. Standard Chartered's Bill Winters called his Wharton MBA a "waste of time". Warren Buffett has also dismissed educational credentials, noting successful leaders like Bill Gates attained excellence without prestigious diplomas.

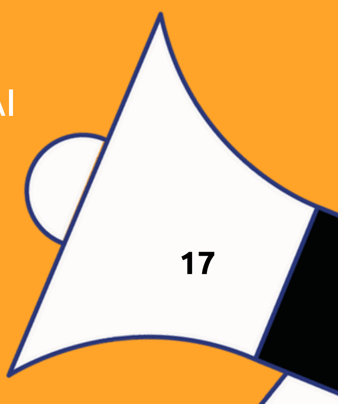
Adaptability rules in the future of work. However, the most adaptable may turn out to be those who've been given least encouragement to adopt and leverage AI – yet who bring the most experience and maturity to the party.

IC challenges

- Middle managers experiencing overwhelming 'sandwich squeeze' pressures
- 'Infinite workday' risks destroying focus and productivity time
- Extreme working hours threatening employee wellbeing and engagement
- Generational divisions creating unequal AI employment impacts

Strategic responses

- Provide targeted support for middle management cohort
- Advocate for protected focus time and boundaries
- Campaign for fair compensation and adequate leave
- Encourage roll-out of AI literacy programmes tailored generationally



Key take-aways: actionable recommendations for internal communicators

1. Establish clear AI usage guidelines, promoting critical evaluation of AI outputs; encourage education of colleagues on AI literacy – and position AI as a collaborative enhancement tool rather than a replacement.

2. Integrate human oversight into critical decision-making processes. Challenge digital systems that claim neutrality whilst curating information. Verify AI-generated answers against multiple sources before acceptance.

3. Communicate renewable energy's economic viability. Highlight green transition as an opportunity, not a cost. Emphasise inaction's financial risks.

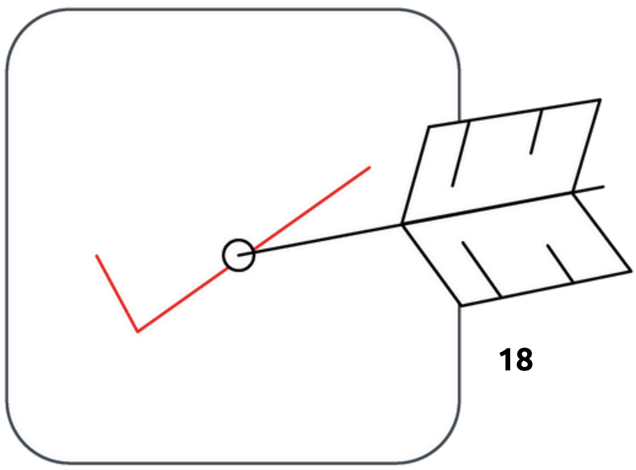
4. Frame climate action as an economic necessity, highlighting the business case for it.

5. Acknowledge financial pressures driving colleagues to polywork. Communicate transparent policies on it. Focus retention efforts on career development, financial wellbeing and workload management to reduce burnout.

6. Subtly convey that 'job-hugging' delivers comparable rewards. Emphasise career development, promotion and benefits packages to retain talent. Address stagnation risks through upskilling and internal mobility opportunities.

7. Encourage reduction of meeting overload during peak productivity hours. Establish boundaries on after-hours communication. Reject unsustainable work cultures; focus on sustainable rhythms over intensity.

8. Support different age cohorts through tailored AI literacy programmes. Encourage prioritisation of EQ and 'vital skills' for the age of AI.



Further recommended reading

AI & tech

- https://hbr.org/2025/09/ai-generated-workslop-is-destroying-productivity?utm_source=perplexity
- https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnwerner/2025/09/12/we-need-empathy-and-trust-in-the-world-of-ai/
- https://futurism.com/more-people-learn-ai-trust
- https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00222429251314491
- https://theconversation.com/ai-veganism-some-peoples-issues-with-ai-parallel-vegans-concerns-about-diet-260277
- https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonsnyder/2025/09/25/why-aeo-may-be-the-most-dangerous-acronym-in-ai/

Sustainability

- https://greencentralbanking.com/2024/02/14/rethinking-inflation-in-times-of-environmental-instability/
- https://autonomy.work/portfolio/on-the-horizon-climate-induced-inflation-and-the-price-of-food/
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- https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/sep/20/simon-stiell-un-climate-chief-climate-progress-green-transition

Employment

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- https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/some-employees-are-destroying-value-others-are-building-it-do-you-know-the-difference
- https://academized.com/blog/milennials
- https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/job-hugging-explained_uk_68c7de0ee4b081f17e8e1dbe

People

- https://www.thehrdigest.com/the-rise-of-the-996-work-culture-has-employees-concerned-in-silicon-valley/
- https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/breaking-down-infinite-workday
- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/middle-manager-burnout-goog_l_68deeba2e4b0c7ccc3c0f054/amp
- https://fortune.com/2025/10/02/gen-z-graduates-linkedin-ceo-college-degrees-future-of-work-ai-skills-hiring-career-advice/
- https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gen-x-ai-jobs-redundancy-b2815946.html
- https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-gen-x-could-your-best-bet-ai-future-panos-malakoudis-acc-eia-7hjoe/

About Working the Future

Foresight specialists helping organisations harness opportunity in the future of work

Established in 2016, Working the Future is a boutique consulting and advisory firm helping businesses adapt to the future of work.

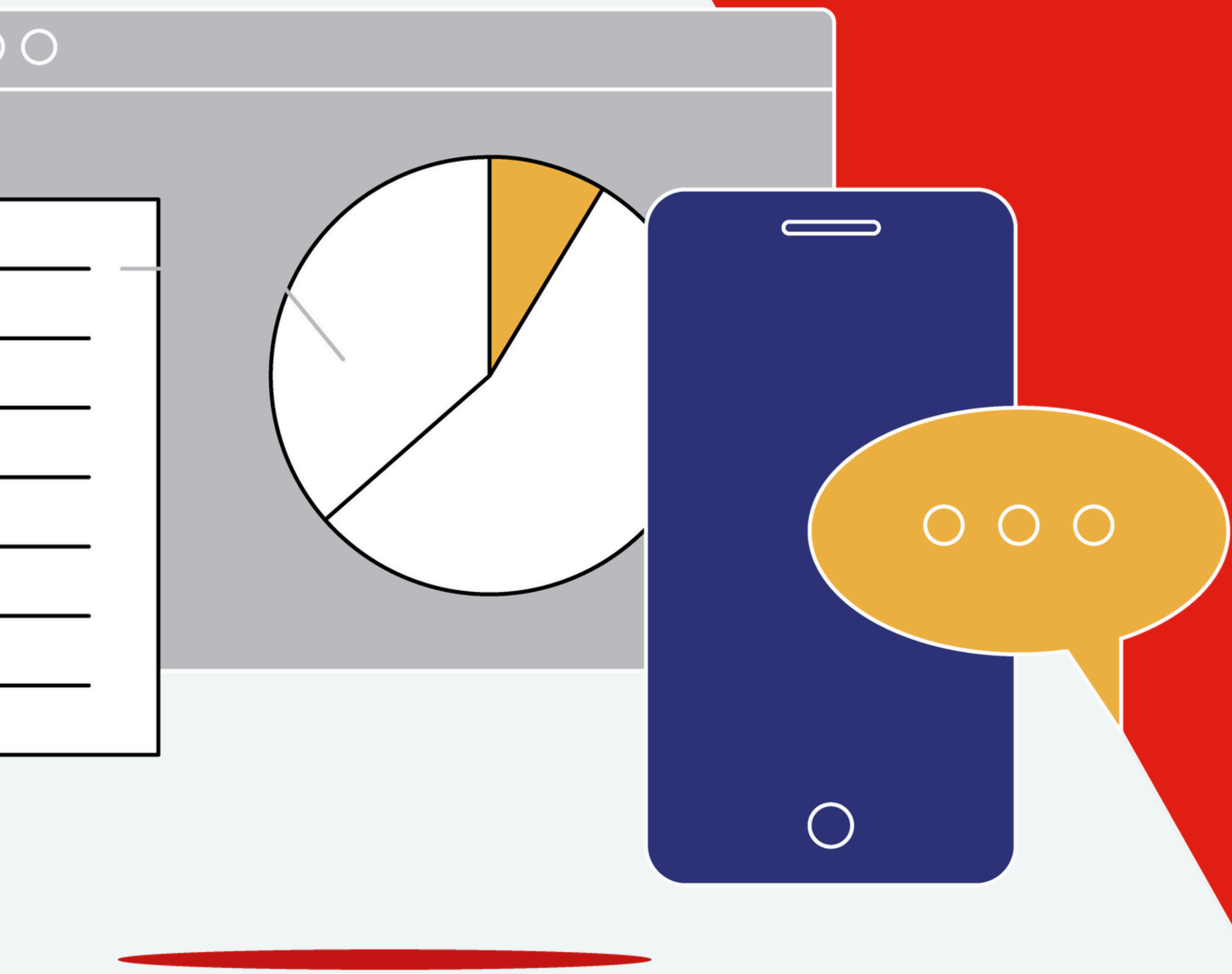
It provides executive education to help business leaders, managers and decision-makers develop their understanding of the rapidly changing world of work, allowing them to prepare and mitigate risk accordingly.

It co-designs progressive strategies to optimise team-performance and organisational agility. Its people-centred approach enhances collective intelligence for improved resilience and long-term organisational sustainability.

About the founders

Cathryn Barnard has a long background in building and nurturing high-performing teams. Her interest in human dynamics has transferred across into her expert analysis of the future of work, and her insights help business leaders future-proof their commercial activities.

Patrick Lodge is a futurist and emerging trends expert, with 20 years' experience in horizon-scanning. He has a particular interest in generating and demystifying business intelligence applicable to all forms of upstream future-planning activity.



www.ioic.org.uk

enquiries@ioic.org.uk