

STATE OF
**WORKPLACE
EMPATHY**
— 2026 —

AI SPECIAL REPORT

**The real AI advantage isn't speed
of adoption. It's workforce readiness.**

As companies race to scale AI, the winners won't simply be the fastest adopters—they'll be the ones that invest in preparing their people as deliberately as they invest in technology.



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Businesssolver's 2026 State of Workplace Empathy study surveyed 300+ C-suite executives (CEO, CFO, CHRO, CPO, CIO, and CTO) and 1,000+ employees, including manager roles.

Companies that outperform don't push AI adoption. They enable it.

Employer-sponsored AI training drives up to 1.5X gains in employee confidence and career agency, yet nearly half of employees say they've been left to "figure out" AI on their own.

Businessolver's **2026 State of Workplace Empathy** study shows **nearly 30% of CEOs say the primary motivation behind AI investment is cost savings through headcount reduction.**

This reality makes empathy even more critical as AI transformation permeates workplaces, fueling anxiety and unease. In fact, 60% of C-suite executives believe there is a "much greater need to demonstrate empathy" as their organizations become more dependent on AI.

But there's no playbook for a technology advancing at light speed, and empathy can easily be sidelined as organizations face pressure to demonstrate AI-driven efficiencies. Unlike the slower burn of the internet and dot-com eras, AI is a hammer. As one CEO observed in *Fortune*, leaders are experiencing a "collective panic attack" around AI's implications.

What can leaders do to address the AI panic?

Data points to employer-sponsored AI training as the antidote to anxiety. **Training makes all the difference in extinguishing AI-driven fear and boosting performance:**

- ✓ Employees who receive adequate AI training report up to **27-point (1.5X) gains** in confidence, agency, and career progression.
- ✓ But access to training is uneven and varies sharply by culture, reaching 87% of employees among those who say their organization is empathetic versus 33% among employees who say their culture is toxic.



35% of employees say they're expected to use AI when they work—jumping to 43% among cultures employees say are toxic.

The workforce is divided on the AI front

- ✓ 61% of employees say AI makes them optimistic about their future at their organization while nearly 40% say they're concerned.
- ✓ And, roughly half (51%) of employees say they've received adequate employer-sponsored AI training, while the other half have been left to figure it out.

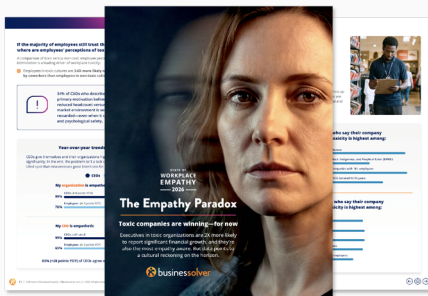


AI training is becoming a defining test of leadership and employer empathy in action, enabling organizations to move quickly without leaving employees behind. As companies race to scale AI, the winners won't simply be the fastest adopters—but rather those that invest in preparing their people as deliberately as they invest in technology.

Executives face mounting pressure and toxicity as AI reshapes the workplace

Businessolver's 2026 State of Workplace Empathy study illustrates the intense pressure many executives are feeling in the age of AI, and how that pressure is fueling an uptick in workplace toxicity:

- ✓ 33% of CEOs—up 25 points year-over-year (YOY)—and 40% of employees (+18 points YOY) say their culture is toxic
- ✓ 73% of C-suite in toxic company cultures cite coworker intimidation
- ✓ 61% of CEOs (+32 points YOY) say it is difficult to demonstrate empathy in their day-to-day work



C-suite executives in toxic organizations are 2X more likely to say their company has grown significantly in the past year compared to executives in non-toxic cultures. Read the full [2026 State of Workplace Empathy Report](#).



A divided workforce: 61% of employees feel optimistic about AI, but nearly 40% are concerned

Employee optimism about AI is real and measurable: **61% of employees say AI makes them optimistic about their future at their organization.** Likewise, 65% say AI has accelerated their career progression. And more than half (54%) say AI gives them greater agency and control over how they work.

Executives are also keen to see the upside of AI: **9 in 10 believe AI can improve understanding of employee stress, tailor benefits more effectively, and reinforce organizational commitments to empathy and innovation**—underscoring that AI adoption isn't just a technical shift—but a human one.

But optimism alone doesn't tell the full story: 39% of employees say AI makes them concerned about their future at their organization. Among employees concerned about AI's impact on their future, **64% report having experienced a mental health issue in the past year** compared to 50% among those who feel optimistic about AI, a 14-point gap.



Friction ignites when employees feel left behind

Fear and coworker intimidation can ignite when employees feel they're falling behind, as is the case with 31% of employees who say they're worried about falling behind on how to effectively use AI in their role.

Data shows CEOs and CHROs aren't fully aligned on how AI can help employees experiencing stress and burnout: 96% of CEOs believe AI will make it easier to understand and support employees experiencing stress or burnout versus 77% of CHROs, a 19-point gap.

Likewise, a 2026 **MetLife** report finds that HR leaders are conflicted. While 80% say that AI is a part of everyday work and 83% say it improves speed, 67% believe that AI is "creating new points of friction and mistrust."



94%
of executives in non-toxic cultures believe AI can help organizations better align benefits with individual employee needs versus **82%** of executives in toxic organizations

Two sides of the AI coin: Optimism versus concern

AI is boosting careers for some and raising mental health concerns for others

AI optimism

Among the 61% of employees who say “AI makes me **optimistic** about my future”:

81% say AI has accelerated their career progression

74% say AI enables them to focus on higher value work

64% say AI gives them more agency and control

AI concern

Among the 39% of employees who say “AI makes me **concerned** about my future”:

64% report mental health issues compared to 50% among those optimistic about AI—a 14-point gap

59% cite depression versus 50% who are not concerned

49% cite workplace toxicity

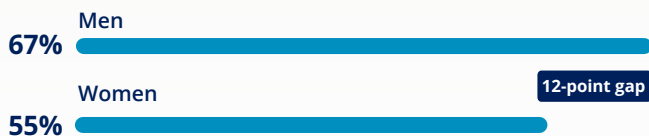
Which employees are most optimistic about AI?

Work location does not drive AI optimism as significantly as leadership role, gender, and company size—with employees at smaller companies 14 points more optimistic than those at larger organizations.

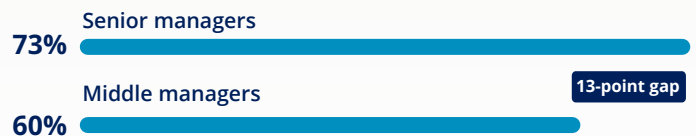
AI makes me optimistic about my future at my organization

(% of employees that selected response)

Gender



Manager role



Work location



Company size



Workplace empathy and culture shape whether AI feels like opportunity or risk

AI perceptions are strongly tied to employer empathy and workplace culture. Employees who view their organizations as empathetic are far more likely to experience AI as empowering and career-building, while employees in toxic cultures are more likely to associate AI with falling behind, career disruption, and added burden.

The empathy advantage: AI optimism significantly rises when employees feel supported

Empathy is associated with significant lifts across every positive AI metric. But the largest gap is seen in training: **While 51% of total employees say they received adequate AI training from their employer, that figure rises to 87% among employees in empathetic organizations—a 36-point advantage.** The training advantage likewise extends to agency (+26) and optimism (+22).

	Average across total employees	Among employees who say "My organization is empathetic/very empathetic "	Percentage point increase in positive perception
I received adequate AI training from my employer	51%	87%	+36
AI gives me more agency and control in how I work	54%	80%	+26
AI makes me optimistic about my future at my organization	61%	83%	+22
AI allows me to focus on higher value work	62%	81%	+19
AI has accelerated my career progression	65%	81%	+16
I am confident in my ability to keep up with current AI trends in my role	69%	80%	+11

Overall, 40% of employees say their company culture is toxic in 2026, but that share rises to 49% among employees who say AI makes them concerned about their future.

How toxic cultures undermine AI readiness

Businessolver’s 2026 State of Workplace Empathy Report revealed a concerning trend: **Toxic organizations are delivering strong short-term financial gains. But those gains are at the expense of employees’ psychological safety and wellbeing.** The findings below suggest AI could be amplifying these people risks. In cultures employees describe as toxic, AI is more likely to be perceived as a source of disruption and uncertainty than a driver of opportunity and growth.



of employees say they’d accept lower pay to work for a more empathetic employer.
Read more in the [2026 State of Workplace Empathy Report](#).

Negative AI perceptions are significantly higher among employees who say their workplace is toxic

In toxic cultures, 54% of employees say AI is disrupting their careers and only 33% report receiving adequate training, highlighting a critical risk to workforce readiness. Likewise, employees in toxic cultures are much more likely to report negative AI experiences: **51% of employees in toxic organizations worry they are falling behind on how to effectively use AI in their role compared with 31% of total employees—a 20-point gap.**

	Average across total employees	Among employees who say “My company culture is toxic ”	Percentage point gap
I worry that I’m falling behind on how to effectively use AI in my role	31%	51%	20 points
AI has slowed or disrupted my career progression	35%	54%	19 points
I received adequate AI training from my employer	51%	33%	18 points
AI shifts additional clean-up, checking, or admin work onto my role	38%	50%	12 points
AI makes me concerned about my future at my organization	39%	51%	12 points



The takeaway: In the AI era, equipping employees with the training, confidence, and support can turn AI from a source of uncertainty and concern into a clear business advantage.

The benefits of AI aren't reaching employees equally

Employees with employer-sponsored AI training are up to 1.5X more likely to report career growth and confidence—making employer investment in AI upskilling a defining advantage.

Employees who received adequate AI training show up to 1.5X (27 points) higher positive sentiments around confidence and career agency compared to employees told to “figure it out.” In this way, data reveals how uneven access to training emerges as an employer risk, amplifying stress and reinforcing perceptions of inequity as AI becomes embedded in daily work.

- ✓ **51%** of employees say they have received adequate employer-sponsored AI training
- ✓ **49%** have been told to “figure it out” themselves or haven’t received much training

Research by **Bright Horizons** similarly found that 42% of employees say their employer expects them to learn AI on their own. Their research also shows:

- ✓ **85%** of employees say they would be more loyal to an employer that invests in continuing AI education
- ✓ **55%** say access to AI training or certification would make them more likely to stay
- ✓ AI adoption jumps to 76% when employers provide AI training, compared to just 25% without support



An uneven playing field: Training boosts AI perceptions by up to 1.5X

Training is emerging as one of the clearest differentiators in how employees feel about AI.

Employees who receive adequate AI training report substantially higher levels of confidence, optimism, agency, and career progression. For employers, it sends a clear message that investing in AI training can help transform AI from a source of uncertainty into a performance driver.

	Among employees who received adequate AI training	Among employees told to figure it out or received limited training	Percentage point gap
AI has accelerated my career progression	78%	51%	27 points (~1.5X)
AI makes me optimistic about my future	73%	49%	24 points (1.5X)
I'm confident in my ability to keep up with AI trends in my role	80%	57%	23 points (1.4X)
AI allows me to focus on higher value work	73%	50%	23 points (~1.5X)
AI gives me more agency and control	63%	43%	20 points (1.4X)



The takeaway: By investing in employer-sponsored AI training, companies can turn AI into a competitive differentiator, equipping employees with the confidence and capability to drive long-term business success.

AI training gaps signal a future workforce readiness risk

Uneven access to AI training across key groups is driving higher concern and increased perceptions of career disruption. Across gender, worker type, and management level, those who report less access to AI training are also more likely to say AI makes them concerned about their future and has slowed or disrupted their career progression.

Gender gaps

Less access to training coincides with higher concern in women

	Women	Men
I received adequate AI training from my employer	45%	56%
AI makes me concerned about my future at my organization	45%	33%
AI has slowed or disrupted my career progression	39%	32%

Worker type gaps

Frontline and non-desk employees show greater risk of feeling left behind versus desk-based employees

	Frontline / non-desk	Desk-based
I received adequate AI training from my employer	44%	57%
AI makes me concerned about my future at my organization	44%	36%
AI has slowed or disrupted my career progression	44%	31%

Management gaps

Top-down implementation gaps show up most clearly among non-managers

	Non-Managers	Managers
I received adequate AI training from my employer	48%	54%
AI makes me concerned about my future at my organization	42%	35%
AI has slowed or disrupted my career progression	40%	31%



The takeaway:

Employers can close AI readiness gaps by expanding role-specific training for groups with less access, reducing concern, career disruption, and perceptions of unequal opportunity.

Orange font indicates significantly higher data point than comparison point.

Gen X emerges as AI's workforce fault line

Compared with Millennials, Gen X employees are 12 points more likely to say AI has slowed or disrupted their career progression. They're also the most concerned about AI's impact on their future, the least likely to report receiving adequate AI training, and the most likely to say they've been left to "figure it out" on their own. While AI perceptions are relatively even across generations overall, the data suggests Gen X could be the most likely to view AI as a potential career disruptor.

Gen X employees are the...

- ✓ Most likely to say AI has slowed or disrupted their career progression at 41%, compared with 29% of Millennials, a 12-point gap
- ✓ Least likely to say they received adequate AI training at 47%, and the most likely to say they have been told to "figure it out"

Gen X reports the highest AI concern and lowest career momentum

	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
AI makes me optimistic about my future at my organization	63%	65%	57%	61%
AI makes me concerned about my future at my organization	37%	35%	43%	39%
AI has accelerated my career progression	65%	71%	59%	62%
AI has slowed or disrupted my career progression	35%	29%	41%	38%
I am confident in my ability to keep up with the current AI trends in my role	69%	74%	66%	64%
I worry that I am falling behind on how to effectively use AI in my role	31%	26%	34%	36%
I received adequate AI training from my employer	53%	53%	47%	50%
I've been told to figure out how to use AI / have not received much training	47%	47%	53%	50%

Gen X findings could signal risk on the horizon for employers. Only 16% say they're fully prepared to cover a \$6K medical bill. Learn more in [Businessolver's 2026 Benefits Insights Report](#).



The AI race will be won by companies that invest in people

AI is accelerating faster than some organizations can equitably support their workforce, creating a new divide where AI training has become a defining act of employer empathy—and a critical differentiator in the race to adopt and implement AI.

The implication is clear: **Employer-sponsored AI training is empathy in action—and a key differentiator for companies—both on the culture and business performance fronts.**

AI training is the mechanism that allows organizations to balance the speed of transformation with the realities of AI-driven workforce anxiety, ensuring that progress doesn't come at the expense of inclusion, trust, and long-term performance.



Supporting employees with role-specific AI training and education is an important way for employers to mitigate AI-related stress and inequality while setting their employees and organizations up for long-term success.

About Businessolver's 11th annual State of Workplace Empathy study

In January and March of 2026, Edelman Data DXI fielded an online survey of more than 1,300 participants across 6 key industries: Financial services, government, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, and technology. This year's survey included a broader cohort of C-suite roles beyond the CEO. To qualify for the survey, respondents needed to be 21 years or older, a U.S. resident, and be employed full-time or part-time within their respective organization with 100 or more employees.

Our survey included subgroups for gender, ethnicity, parent/non-parent status, veteran status, managers, work location status (remote, hybrid, in-person), and generations. Small employers are defined as organizations that employ 100-999 employees. Large employers are defined as organizations that employ 1,000+ employees.

Unless otherwise noted, findings are cited throughout in "Top-2 Box" on 4- and 5-point scales (e.g. agree/strongly agree, important/extremely important).

About Businessolver

Businessolver is an independently owned benefits technology company advancing a more proactive, connected, and anticipatory benefits experience. Through a secure SaaS platform, governed intelligence, and an always-on service model designed to act early and stay aligned, Businessolver helps organizations reduce complexity, strengthen engagement, and deliver consistent outcomes across total wellbeing. With more than two decades of innovation, Businessolver unifies people, data, and operations so that insights turn into action — and benefits work better for employers, employees, and partners.