Designing the Human-AI Enterprise

WORK IS NOW TASK CHAINS

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How human and machine execution is shifting the real unit of work from jobs to operational sequences.

In theory, the way we plan headcount, org structures, compensation bands, workforce plans, and job families is based on the job as a fundamental way to think about how work happens. That's not as true anymore. In a world with a human-AI combination, the fundamental building block isn't the job description. It's the actual series of tasks, handoffs, decisions, approvals, retrievals, and exception-handling steps that get a piece of work from trigger to completion. That series of steps is referred to as a task chain.

This is not easy to dismiss, especially in light of the 2025 Microsoft Work Trend Index. Here, we have references to "Frontier Firms" and their intelligence on demand, human agent teams, and the more fluid nature of work charts and their focus on outcomes rather than traditional org structure. We also have references to how management expects to see teams in five years redesign business processes with AI, build multi-agent systems, train their agents, and manage them. This is not a redesign of the job box but rather the flow of work. If we are speaking to how we organize work around outcomes, contributors, and AI flows, then we are speaking to how we manage the execution.

A task chain is simply the process by which the work gets done. A signal is received. Context is retrieved. Evidence is surfaced. A draft or recommendation is generated. A decision is made by a person or system. The work progresses to the next step. Exceptions are escalated. Results are recorded. But as soon as we add AI into this process, this process changes. The process of retrieval goes from purely human to assisted by the model. Triage becomes partially automated. A step in the process goes from taking thirty minutes to taking three. The process of review goes from everyone to everyone above a certain threshold. The job title may be the same, but the underlying process changes dramatically. Same badge, different machine.

That's important because many organizations still go about redesigning in the wrong places. They redesign jobs over here, systems over there, and tools somewhere else, and then wonder why performance is improving in some places and not in others. A cleaner explanation is offered by the State of AI survey conducted by McKinsey in March 2025. The organizations seeing material value are not just providing access to models. They are also redesigning workflows, governance, and other aspects of the organization to allow AI to change how work is done. McKinsey finds that workflow redesign has the strongest relationship to EBIT impact from gen AI, yet only 21 percent of the respondents from organizations using gen AI say they've fundamentally

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redesigned at least some workflows. That's the gap. Most organizations are adopting AI faster than they're redesigning the workflows through which work is actually performed.

A task chain perspective also helps to quickly identify where AI should or should not fit. There will be some steps that are well-structured, repetitive, and low-variance. These can safely be automated within well-defined limits. There will also be steps that are unclear, high-stakes, or variable. These should remain under strong human control. And there will also be steps where a combination of human and AI can work together thoughtfully to get a good end result. This is why role-based terminology is now too imprecise to be particularly useful. A single role may contain all three types of steps. Analyzing a role as a whole as "automatable" or "not automatable" misses the underlying decisions and is almost certainly leading to poor control flow.

The labor market data also points in the same direction. The International Labor Organization has issued an updated version of their 2025 report on generative AI and jobs, using a more refined task-level approach to arrive at a more accurate occupational exposure index. The results show that around one in four jobs worldwide is exposed to generative AI transformation. The interesting aspect here is not replacement but rather transformation. Human involvement is still required in a large part of the work. This is precisely what a task chain approach also points to. Most enterprises are not seeing a replacement of jobs in their immediate future but rather a restructuring of work within existing jobs.

Similarly, the World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report 2025" draws the same conclusion from the other side, the workforce. It states, "For 63 percent of employers, skill gaps are the largest barrier to business transformation. Employers expect 39 percent of the workforce's core skills to change by 2030." These aren't just statistics to be included in a keynote presentation and forgotten. These are operational metrics. Skills are evolving because the workforce is evolving. The workforce is evolving because execution chains are evolving to support AI, human oversight, and new logic in the workflow. If we continue to think in terms of capability only in terms of the role, we're managing the name, not the mechanism.

A task chain approach also reveals friction points that may be obscured by a job-based approach. Where is work slowing down? Where is context being lost between steps? Where are people overriding the system repeatedly? Where is there unnecessary approvals? Where is there escalation too late? Where is AI speeding up work but compromising judgment because of a wrong step being automated? These are execution design questions. They will only come to light if you consider the chain of

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work rather than focusing on the job. This is why many AI initiatives show uneven results. The AI may be good. The chain may never have been designed.

The implication for executives is simple: stop asking what jobs are most affected by AI. Ask instead what task chains are already in motion. Ask where signals are entering the process, where contexts are being retrieved, where AI is already affecting the sequence or judgment, where human approval is still required, and where the process must escalate in the event of an exception. Then design the process anew. Jobs are still relevant for organizational structure, accountability, compensation, and workforce management. They are just not relevant enough if the aim is to design enterprise execution in a world where both humans and AI are present.

Companies that do this early will design work with more precision than their competitors. They'll know which steps can be delegated, which require supervision, which depend on human judgment, and which need stronger telemetry. In other words, they won't just deploy more AI. They'll build better execution architecture. In the next phase of workforce transformation, that's where the real advantage sits.

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