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Same tools, different futures: UAE Knowledge workers on AI

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ABSTRACT

Forecasts about artificial intelligence and employment usually estimate which tasks machines can perform. They say less about how workers themselves reason about their occupational futures. This qualitative study examined how people in the knowledge economy of the United Arab Emirates anticipated the effects of AI on their work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 professionals across six occupational groups: software and data work, financial and professional services, higher education and research, creative and communication work, business analysis, and enterprise development. Interviews traced concrete work products through their stages and used two contrasting staffing scenarios to elicit conditional expectations. Reflexive thematic analysis produced five themes: the redistribution of tasks within occupations, professional authority grounded in responsibility, uncertain routes into expertise for newcomers, unequal capacity to prepare for change, and the terms on which productivity gains are shared. Across these themes, expectations about jobs were conditional rather than fixed. The same technical improvement appeared promising when employers preserved learning, recognized responsibility, and shared efficiency gains, and threatening when it accompanied reduced recruitment, narrower discretion, or higher output targets. Confidence in national economic prospects could coexist with concern about personal careers. The findings suggest that the occupational consequences of AI depend heavily on organizational choices about hiring, training, and reward.

INTRODUCTION

Each wave of capable software brings a new round of predictions about which jobs will survive. Some estimates have suggested that a large share of occupations is susceptible to computerization (Frey & Osborne, 2017), and analyses of large language models indicate that many tasks in professional and knowledge-intensive occupations are now within the reach of these systems (Eloundou et al., 2024). Yet automation has historically changed the composition of work as much as it has eliminated it, and the employment consequences of a technology depend on how organizations combine it with human labor (Autor, 2015). Workers, for their part, do not experience AI as an abstract exposure score. They experience it through particular tasks, particular employers, and particular career paths.

The United Arab Emirates offers a distinctive setting for examining these experiences. The country has made AI a stated priority in its national planning, with a strategy that aims to place the UAE among the world's leading AI nations by 2031 and

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that includes attracting and training talent for AI-enabled jobs (UAE Government, n.d.). Its knowledge economy brings together Emirati and expatriate professionals working under varied employment arrangements. In such a setting, public confidence in technological progress may sit alongside private uncertainty about one's own position, and the question of who bears the costs and receives the benefits of AI adoption is especially pertinent.

This article reports an interpretive qualitative study of how 24 knowledge workers in the UAE anticipated the effects of AI on their work. Its central question concerned the conditions under which workers expected AI to strengthen, reorganize, or weaken their occupational position. Rather than asking participants whether they were optimistic or pessimistic, the study followed concrete work products through their stages and asked how alternative organizational arrangements would change participants' outlook. The analysis paid particular attention to accounts in which confidence about economic development coexisted with uncertainty about individual careers.

BACKGROUND

Tasks, Occupations, and Organizational Choice

Economic research on automation has moved from occupations to tasks. Autor (2015) argued that automation tends to substitute for some tasks while complementing others, so that the total effect on employment depends on demand, on the elasticity of labor supply, and on the tasks that remain. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019) added that technology can create new tasks in which human labor has an advantage, reinstating demand for workers even as other tasks are displaced. On this view, the future of an occupation cannot be read off the technical capability of a tool. It depends on how firms reorganize work, whether new tasks emerge, and how gains in productivity are used. Realizing such gains can itself depend on overcoming organizational resistance and addressing governance and trust concerns (Habib Zadeh Khiyaban & Sabbar, 2026). Early evidence on generative AI points in more than one direction. In a large field study of customer support agents, access to a generative AI assistant raised productivity, with the largest gains among less experienced workers (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025). An experiment with professional writing tasks found that generative AI reduced the time taken and raised the quality of output (Noy & Zhang, 2023). Such findings suggest that the technology can narrow differences between novices and experts. They do not settle whether firms will use the gains to expand output, improve quality, or reduce staffing, and they say little about how workers interpret these possibilities.

Workers' Perceptions and Emotional Responses

Workers' perceptions of intelligent technologies have been studied mainly through surveys. Brougham and Haar (2018) found that employees who perceived greater threat from smart technology, AI, robotics, and algorithms reported lower organizational commitment and career satisfaction, and higher intentions to leave. Public discourse about AI and work is also marked by strong emotion. Sabbar and Habib Zadeh Khiyaban (2023) traced how digital discussions of AI-driven job loss combined emotional and rhetorical responses, and Berger and Shahghasemi (2026) mapped the frames through which anxiety about AI is expressed in social media discourse. These studies show that perceptions of AI are bound up with judgments about professional worth and security. In the present study they served as sensitizing references for attention to uncertainty and professional value, not as a predetermined coding scheme or as evidence about UAE workers.

Learning a Profession

A further strand of research concerns how people become competent practitioners. Lave and Wenger (1991) described learning as legitimate peripheral participation, in which newcomers gain expertise by taking part in simplified but genuine tasks at the edge of a community of practice. Automation can disturb this process. In a study of robotic surgery, Beane (2019) found that the technology reduced opportunities for trainees to practice under supervision, and that those who became skilled often did so through informal and sometimes unsanctioned routes. Knowledge work may face a

similar problem if AI takes over the drafting, compiling, and checking through which junior professionals have traditionally learned.

Taken together, these literatures suggest that the occupational effects of AI are mediated by organizational decisions about tasks, staffing, learning, and reward. What remains less clear is how workers themselves reason about these decisions when they consider their futures. The present study addresses that question in the context of the UAE knowledge economy.

METHOD

Design and Interpretive Position

The study used an interpretive qualitative design, which allowed expectations about job security, professional value, and adaptability to be examined in participants' own terms. Knowledge work was defined by the centrality of creating, interpreting, or applying specialized information to an occupational task. The definition included technical development, professional advice, research, teaching, organizational analysis, and creative production, and it excluded roles included only because the employer operated in a technology sector. The unit of analysis was an account of anticipated occupational change, situated within the speaker's responsibilities and employment circumstances. Statements about national economic prospects were treated as interpretations rather than verified forecasts.

The analysis distinguished participants' explanations from the researcher's reading of them. It considered how an expectation was justified, what experience supported it, and what might lead the speaker to revise it. Emotional responses were examined alongside arguments about technical capability and organizational decisions.

Sampling

A maximum-variation purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) produced a sample of 24 adults working in the UAE, with four participants in each of six occupational groups. Participants had at least two years of knowledge-intensive work and could discuss either their direct use of AI or a concrete debate about its adoption in their organization. Both users and nonusers of AI were included, since a sample of enthusiastic adopters would have obscured delayed adoption, distrust, and workplace constraints. Table 1 presents the occupational groups and the contrasts sought within each.

Table 1. Occupational Sampling Frame

Occupational group	n	Contrast sought
Software and data work	4	Implementation authority and support roles
Financial and professional services	4	Analytical work and client accountability
Higher education and research	4	Teaching, research, and early career work
Creative and communication work	4	Independent work and salaried production
Business and organizational analysis	4	Junior preparation and senior decisions
Innovation and enterprise development	4	Founders and employees in small teams
Total	24	Variation within and across groups

Sampling also sought variation in seniority, organizational size, employment arrangement, and access to employer-supported training. The sample included Emirati and expatriate perspectives, without treating either category as internally uniform. Participants were recruited through professional associations, university networks, and public occupational communities. Employers played no role in selecting participants, and managers were not informed of who took part. Referrals were used only for perspectives poorly represented through the initial routes, and referral chains were documented so that any concentration within networks would be visible.

The sample size was treated as a practical boundary rather than as evidence of thematic saturation. In line with the notion of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), analytical adequacy rested on the specificity of occupational examples, the presence of competing interpretations, and the capacity to compare working conditions across cases. Four cases per group supported the examination of contrasts but not claims about how common a view

was within an occupation. The analysis therefore did not report percentages of thematic agreement or extrapolate occupational patterns to the UAE workforce.

Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were planned to last approximately 60 to 75 minutes. Opening questions established participants' ordinary responsibilities and asked for a recent example of a task affected by AI. Follow-up prompts separated changes already experienced from expectations about the future, and this distinction was maintained throughout the analysis: familiarity with a tool does not establish knowledge of future hiring decisions, and an expectation of technological progress does not specify its consequences for a given occupation.

The interview guide followed a concrete work product, such as an analytical report, a teaching resource, or a software change, through its stages. Questions asked who defined the problem, who prepared the first output, who checked it, and who remained responsible when it was used. Following a work product gave practical meaning to terms such as judgment and creativity. Further prompts addressed how preparatory work contributed to learning, how clients assessed value, and whether shorter production times changed the allocation of responsibility.

Two neutral scenarios provided a common basis for comparison. In the first, an employer introduced AI while retaining staff and investing part of the time saved in training and quality assurance. In the second, the same technical improvement was accompanied by reduced recruitment and higher output targets. Neither was presented as the expected future. Participants were asked how each arrangement would affect them, what would make it credible, and who could influence the outcome. The order of the scenarios alternated across interviews to reduce framing effects.

The closing discussion addressed two-year and five-year horizons, asking which tasks might change first, which responsibilities might remain, and what developments would alter the participant's outlook. Questions about preparation distinguished personal learning from opportunities provided by employers. A final invitation allowed participants to challenge the assumptions of the interview and raise issues outside the guide. Table 2 summarizes the interview domains; follow-up questions remained responsive to each occupational account.

Table 2. Interview Domains and Analytic Purpose

Domain	Example prompt	Analytic purpose
Recent experience	Describe a task that changed after AI became available.	Separate experience from expectation.
Professional value	What still requires your judgment, and why?	Specify the basis of claimed expertise.
Entry into work	How would a newcomer learn if first drafts were automated?	Examine routes into professional competence.
Organizational choice	How do the two staffing scenarios change your outlook?	Identify the conditions behind expectations.
Career preparation	What learning can you realistically undertake?	Distinguish willingness from access.
Revision of expectations	What would make you change your forecast?	Locate uncertainty and contrary evidence.

Language

Interviews were conducted in English or Arabic according to participant preference and interviewer competence. Arabic material retained its original wording during coding, and passages used in English reporting were translated and reviewed for occupational meaning, with particular care for terms referring to competence, responsibility, and formal authority. Language choice was treated as part of the interview context rather than as an indicator of expertise. The recruitment routes may nevertheless have favored professionals comfortable discussing their work through the networks used.

Ethical Considerations

The protocol required institutional ethical review before recruitment and separate consent for participation, recording, and the use of anonymized material, and it set a withdrawal deadline before synthesis. Employer names, commercially sensitive information, and combinations of details that could

identify a specialist in a small professional community were excluded from reporting. Permission records were stored separately from interview material. Questions avoided confidential client details, and the design did not depend on employer endorsement of any individual's account. To protect participants in small professional communities, findings are reported as thematic interpretations without attributed quotations.

Analysis

The analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It began with close reading and a contextual memo for each account, distinguishing the participant's responsibilities, direct experience of AI, expectations about jobs, and the conditions attached to those expectations. Initial coding stayed close to accounts of efficiency, checking, responsibility, hiring, learning, and bargaining power, and codes were revised as meanings diverged. A reference to training, for example, could express confidence in adaptation, frustration about limited time, or concern that an employer was shifting responsibility to the individual. These meanings were not collapsed into a single favorable or unfavorable attitude.

Candidate themes were built around explanatory relationships rather than collections of similar topics. A theme about professional judgment had to explain how participants connected judgment to continued employment, client trust, or responsibility; a theme about early career work had to show why a change in the allocation of tasks mattered for learning and advancement. Each candidate theme was checked against complete accounts, including passages that resisted the initial interpretation, and changes in theme boundaries were recorded together with the reasons for retaining or rejecting a proposed explanation.

A case-by-theme matrix supported comparison across occupational groups and career stages. Its cells contained brief summaries linked to passages rather than numerical scores. Contrasts within groups were examined before differences between groups were described. A founder anticipating expansion and an employee fearing reduced recruitment could refer to the same technology while occupying different positions in an organization, and the analysis preserved that difference rather than assigning the organization a single outlook. Reflexive memos examined the researcher's assumptions about innovation, productivity, and professional status, and alternative readings were considered during theme development rather than relying on coder agreement as a substitute for interpretive judgment. Theme importance rested on explanatory contribution and the quality of contrasts, not on frequency. Contradictory cases were retained to delimit claims, and expectations about employment were kept separate from observations of actual job losses.

The final synthesis connected themes across three levels: changes to individual tasks, changes to the organization of professional work, and expectations about occupational opportunity. Each theme was examined for the conditions under which its interpretation would hold and for cases suggesting a different outcome. The resulting model does not predict employment numbers. It describes how assessments of technology became assessments of responsibility, learning, and organizational choice.

FINDINGS

Overview

Participants' expectations about future jobs were conditional on how technological change would be organized. Faster production appeared promising when employers preserved learning opportunities, recognized responsibility, and shared the benefits of improved efficiency. The same capability appeared threatening when it was associated with reduced recruitment, narrower discretion, or higher output targets without additional support. Confidence in the technical potential of AI could therefore coexist with concern about career progression. Optimism and apprehension were attached to different anticipated arrangements rather than forming two opposed camps of participants.

Five themes specify this conditional outlook: the redistribution of tasks within an occupation, the changing basis of professional authority, the weakening or redesign of early career learning,

unequal capacity to prepare for change, and the terms on which productivity gains are shared. The themes overlap because a change in one part of the employment relationship can alter the meaning of another. Faster preparation may free time for mentoring, for instance, but it may also remove the tasks through which newcomers previously gained experience. Table 3 sets out each theme alongside the competing interpretation that prevents it from becoming a one-directional prediction.

Table 3. Themes and Competing Interpretations

Theme	Central interpretation	Competing interpretation
Task redistribution	Roles shift toward checking and coordination.	Automation may also absorb review tasks.
Professional authority	Accountability and contextual judgment retain value.	Employers may standardize work and narrow discretion.
Early career learning	Less preparatory work may reduce opportunities to learn.	Guided AI use may offer new opportunities for practice.
Capacity to prepare	Time and organizational support shape adaptability.	Independent learning can partly bypass formal support.
Sharing productivity gains	Staffing and reward decisions shape expectations about jobs.	Expansion may create work despite reduced effort per task.

Work Reorganized Around the Remaining Tasks

The first theme concerned the composition of a job. Accounts from professional services described how automating a preliminary comparison left the adviser responsible for defining the client's question, identifying missing information, and judging whether an output supported a recommendation. Accounts from software work drew a similar line between assistance in producing code and the work of integration, testing, and maintenance. These distinctions supported expectations of altered responsibilities rather than the sudden disappearance of occupational titles. They also raised a harder question: whether the remaining work would sustain the existing number of positions.

The answer depended on organizational scale and demand. A small enterprise with unmet demand could use faster preparation to take on work it had previously turned down. A larger team handling a fixed volume of assignments could respond instead by changing its staffing needs. Both responses are compatible with the same gain in task efficiency. The analysis therefore keeps increased output capacity separate from increased employment. An expectation that work will become easier cannot, by itself, establish whether an organization will expand, hold staffing steady, or reduce recruitment.

A contrary case complicated the assumption that checking would provide lasting protection. Where review consists largely of applying explicit rules to standardized outputs, improved systems could also shorten that stage, and the boundary between production and review continues to move. A credible account of professional survival needed to specify the judgment involved and explain why an organization would still need a person to exercise it. Describing a future role simply as oversight left the central employment question unresolved.

Professional Authority Tied to Responsibility

The second theme located professional value in the relationship between a work product and its consequences. Accounts from education emphasized whether a resource suited a particular group of learners; accounts from financial analysis emphasized whether an output supported a decision in the client's actual circumstances. Generating fluent material carried less weight than being able to defend its use. Responsibility included recognizing when the available information did not permit a confident answer and explaining that limitation to someone who had to act. Continued demand for expertise was thus justified through contextual evaluation rather than through a general assertion of human superiority.

This interpretation gives domain knowledge a continuing role, but it does not make expertise immune to organizational change. A standardized workflow may restrict the circumstances in which an employee is permitted to question an output, and a manager may notice speed and completion more readily than a careful refusal or correction. The

resulting concern was about reduced authority as well as job loss. A person could remain employed while exercising less discretion over what counts as acceptable work. The theme thus separates three things that are often run together: continued employment, meaningful professional control, and the recognition of expertise.

Creative work offered a competing basis of value. A client might prize an identifiable style, a sustained relationship, or the experience of working with a particular professional. AI-assisted production could lower the price of routine material while increasing the importance of such relationships for some assignments. That outcome would remain dependent on client preferences and purchasing arrangements. It does not justify a general claim that human creativity will always command a premium; it identifies a further reason why similar technical capabilities can have different occupational consequences.

Uncertain Routes Into Expertise

The third theme concerned the work through which people learn a profession. Preparing a first draft, assembling evidence, and checking a simple case may be low-status activities, yet they bring newcomers into contact with professional standards. In early career accounts, the removal of these activities opened a gap between formal qualification and the judgment expected of an experienced employee. The concern was that organizations might continue to demand independent evaluation while reducing the opportunities to develop it. Job prospects then depended on whether a credible route existed from novice participation to responsible practice.

Senior accounts were more optimistic about supervised learning. AI could provide alternative examples, generate imperfect work for critique, or allow a trainee to attempt a task many times. These uses would address the learning problem only if someone organized the practice and gave feedback. A related pedagogical perspective is offered by research on virtual education, which emphasizes active participation, collaborative interaction, and thoughtful instructional design as important conditions for effective technology-supported learning (Dastyar et al., 2023). Access to a tool would not by itself demonstrate the ability to recognize a subtle error or explain why it mattered. The disagreement therefore centered on how learning would be organized rather than on differing attitudes toward technology.

The scenarios also exposed a tension in the promise of faster advancement. A newcomer may be able to produce a polished output earlier, but the appearance of competence can conceal uncertainty about how the output was obtained. An employer seeking immediate productivity might accept that appearance until an unusual case revealed the gap. Training arrangements that include explanation, revision, and supervised responsibility would make the development of competence more visible. Entry into knowledge work, on this reading, may be redesigned rather than simply eroded, with very different consequences depending on whether employers treat learning as an investment or as an avoidable cost.

Preparation Constrained by Working Conditions

The fourth theme distinguished willingness to adapt from the capacity to do so. An established employee with protected learning time could imagine a manageable transition into new responsibilities. An independent professional with uncertain income might have to learn between paid assignments and might hesitate to pay for training of unclear occupational value. The difference was not necessarily one of motivation. It arose from the resources available for experimentation and from how much risk a person could absorb while learning. A study of architecture students in Iran offers a useful parallel: socioeconomic status was associated with university and major selection, but not with reported educational motivation, highlighting the distinction between access to opportunities and willingness to learn (Dariush et al., 2017).

Employment continuity and mobility shaped what preparation meant. A worker expecting to stay with one organization could assess training by its contribution to internal advancement, while another might favor skills that could be demonstrated to several employers and clients. These orientations did not map onto citizenship or residency categories.

The relevant distinction concerned how a person understood continuity, mobility, and dependence within a particular employment arrangement. This reading directs attention to career circumstances and avoids attributing a uniform attitude to Emirati or expatriate workers.

An entrepreneurial case gave independent learning a more positive meaning. A professional outside a large organization could use accessible tools to test a service, build a portfolio, and reach potential clients, so that limited access to formal training did not prevent experimentation. The ability to experiment, however, is different from securing regular demand or a sustainable income. The theme retains both possibilities: AI can lower some barriers to trying new work while leaving large differences in the capacity to turn that trial into a stable occupational position.

Productivity Gains and the Terms of Employment

The fifth theme concerned the decisions that connect efficiency to employment. In the staffing-preservation scenario, the organization used saved time for quality improvement and staff development. In the reduced-recruitment scenario, it raised the output expected of each employee and narrowed entry opportunities. These arrangements implied different futures even though the technical improvement was identical. Participants' expectations placed hiring, training, workload, and reward at the center, rather than treating them as automatic consequences of what AI can do.

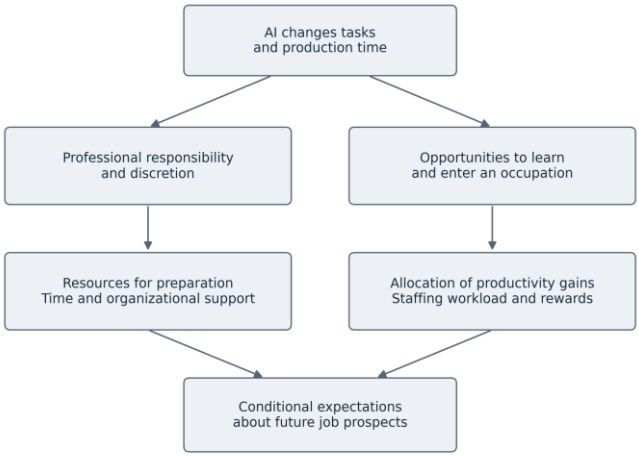
The prospect of national economic growth did not settle this occupational question. A person could welcome investment and new enterprise while remaining concerned about how opportunities would be distributed. A founder might expect a market to expand while an employee in the same line of work anticipated weaker bargaining power. These positions are not inconsistent; they refer to different outcomes and different locations within the employment relationship. Their reasoning needs to be understood before they are labeled as enthusiasm, resistance, or anxiety.

The theme also allowed for delayed and uneven change. An employer might retain staff because demand is growing, because clients still want personal service, or because changing a workflow is costly. Such an arrangement could preserve employment without guaranteeing long-term security. Conversely, a temporary reduction in recruitment would not prove that an occupation has no future. Participants' predictions are therefore best understood as conditional judgments whose credibility depends on particular organizational decisions and time horizons.

Relationships Among the Themes

Figure 1 brings the themes together as an interpretive model. Changes to tasks mattered for job expectations through their implications for professional responsibility and for opportunities to learn. The capacity to prepare and the allocation of productivity gains shaped how those implications were understood. The arrows represent conceptual relationships rather than estimated causal effects or forecasts of employment levels. The model highlights the conditions under which the same technical improvement could support occupational expansion, restricted entry, or diminished professional discretion.

Figure 1. *Interpretive Model of Conditional Expectations About Jobs*



Note. Arrows indicate conceptual relationships among themes rather than causal effects or forecasts of employment levels.

DISCUSSION

The central finding of this study is that knowledge workers in the UAE did not hold fixed views about AI and their jobs. Their expectations were conditional, and the conditions they named were organizational rather than technical. Participants generally accepted that AI would make many tasks faster. What they could not know, and what most shaped their outlook, was how employers would use that speed: to improve quality and develop staff, or to raise targets and reduce recruitment. This framing echoes the task-based view in labor economics, in which the employment effects of automation depend on how displaced and newly created tasks are combined and on how demand responds (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Autor, 2015). Participants arrived at a similar conclusion from the vantage point of their own work.

The findings also clarify why measures of optimism or anxiety may miss what matters. Survey research has linked perceived threat from intelligent technology to lower commitment and career satisfaction (Brougham & Haar, 2018), and public discourse about AI and work is often emotionally charged (Berger & Shahghasemi, 2026; Sabbar & Habib Zadeh Khiyaban, 2023). In the present accounts, emotional responses were tied to specific organizational possibilities. The same participant could be confident about the national economy, enthusiastic about a tool, and worried about promotion prospects. Classifying such a person as optimistic or anxious would obscure the reasoning that connects these positions.

The theme of professional authority suggests that the threat to knowledge work may take the form of diminished discretion as well as job loss. Participants grounded their value in responsibility for consequences: deciding whether an output suits a client, a class, or a system, and being accountable when it does not. Even where AI models outperform conventional methods in predictive accuracy, questions of interpretability and fairness remain open (Habib Zadeh Khiyaban & Sabbar, 2022). If workflows standardize these judgments or reward speed over careful correction, workers may keep their titles while losing control over what counts as good work. This possibility deserves more attention in research and policy, which tend to measure the effects of AI in terms of employment and wages.

The concern about early career learning is perhaps the most consequential. Evidence that generative AI raises the productivity of less experienced workers most (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025) is often read as good news for newcomers. The accounts in this study add a caution. If AI performs the preparatory tasks through which juniors have traditionally learned, the short-term gain in output may come at the cost of the long-term development of judgment. This concern is consistent with theories of learning as participation in genuine practice (Lave

& Wenger, 1991) and with evidence that automation can cut trainees off from supervised practice (Beane, 2019). Senior participants pointed toward a remedy in deliberately designed training, but that remedy depends on employers treating learning as an investment.

The fourth theme shows that adaptability is not simply a matter of attitude. Calls for workers to reskill assume time, money, and tolerance for risk that are unevenly distributed. In a labor market such as that of the UAE, where employment arrangements and career horizons vary widely, the meaning of preparation depends on whether a worker expects to advance within one organization or to move between employers and clients. Notably, these orientations did not divide neatly along Emirati and expatriate lines. National strategies that emphasize training for AI-enabled jobs (UAE Government, n.d.) may therefore need to consider who has the time and support to take up such training, not only what skills it should cover.

For organizations, the findings suggest that how AI is introduced will shape how workers respond to it. Commitments to retain entry-level positions, to protect time for learning, to preserve professional discretion, and to share efficiency gains would address the conditions on which participants' expectations depended. For policymakers, the findings caution against treating aggregate economic growth as an answer to occupational uncertainty. Growth and weakened individual bargaining power can occur together.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations. Its purposive sample of 24 participants, with four in each occupational group, supports the examination of contrasts but not claims about the prevalence of views within occupations or across the UAE workforce. The findings concern anticipated developments, and participants' expectations may not match future hiring, training, or reward decisions. Recruitment through professional associations, university networks, and occupational communities may have favored professionals who were comfortable discussing their work and well connected. Interviews in two languages required translation of some material, which may have affected nuances of meaning despite review. The study cannot establish differences attributable to citizenship, occupation, or organizational size alone, and the analysis relied on a single interpretive perspective, mitigated but not eliminated by reflexive memos and attention to contrary cases.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Longitudinal research could follow workers and organizations as AI is introduced, comparing expectations with actual decisions about staffing, training, and reward. Studies of early career professionals are especially needed to examine whether and how organizations redesign entry routes into knowledge work. Comparative research across Gulf labor markets and other national contexts could clarify how employment arrangements and migration regimes shape the meaning of preparation. Organizational case studies could also examine how professional discretion changes when AI-assisted workflows become standard.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge workers in the UAE did not see AI as a simple threat or a simple opportunity. They saw a technical capability whose consequences depended on how employers would allocate tasks, responsibility, learning, and the gains from efficiency. Their accounts placed the future of jobs in the interaction between technology and employment arrangements. Retaining a job title did not necessarily mean retaining authority, and access to AI did not necessarily mean access to professional learning. If AI is to strengthen rather than weaken knowledge work, the decisive questions may concern not what the technology can do but how organizations choose to use the time it saves.

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