

ISAR Journal of Science and Technology

Volume 4, Issue 11, 2026, Page: 11-18

Abbriviate Title- ISAR J Sci Tech

ISSN *(Online)*- 2584-2056

https://isarpublisher.com/journal/isarjst

Artificial Intelligence Adoption and Workforce Transformation: The Moderating Role of Strategic Leadership

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Article History

Received: 02.09.2026
Revised: 27.09.2026
Accepted: 20.10.2026
Published: 07.11.2026

Abstract: Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to transform the nature of work, yet the extent to which this happens is highly heterodox across workplaces. In this conceptual article, the authors offer a possible answer to this difference: the strategic leadership as a moderator of the relationship between AI adoption and workforce transformation. It integrates both upper echelons theory and dynamic capabilities theory with the job demands-resources model, and it proposes four facets of workforce transformation: skill reconfiguration, job redesign, employment change, and employee well-being. Six propositions follow. AI use has both positive and negative consequences such as skill reconfiguration, job redesign and job insecurity. Top management vision enhances the positive path, while ethical leadership diminishes the negative path. The link between leadership involvement and adoption benefits is curvilinear (too much control is bad) and it is different for each stage of implementation. The authors propose that strategic leadership's moderating effect is more pronounced in situations where resources are scarce, like small and medium-sized enterprises or emerging economies such as Africa. The article adds value to the literature. It does not presume that strategic leadership is always good news as it makes connections between managerial choices and employee experience at various levels of analysis, and extends the debate beyond the current literature on advanced economy countries. It concludes with implications for management and a research agenda for testing the propositions.

Keywords: artificial intelligence adoption, workforce transformation, strategic leadership, upper echelons theory, job demands-resources, emerging economies.

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Cite this article:

Ikuru, M. T., (2026). Artificial Intelligence Adoption and Workforce Transformation: The Moderating Role of Strategic Leadership. *ISAR Journal of Science and Technology*, *4*(11), 11-18.

1. Introduction

The transformative role of AI in the workplace is changing at a more rapid pace than organisations can adapt. By 2030, employers believe that 170 million jobs will be created and 92 million will be lost and 39% of the core skills will change (World Economic Forum, 2025). But the impact of AI on the workforce is not universal. AI can generate new jobs but in some organisations can lead to upskilling, engagement and increased performance, and in others to insecurity, strain and resistance (Kim et al., 2025; Pinho et al., 2026). This ambivalence is reflected in a systematic review of workers' experiences, which also indicates that workers see the potential for AI to augment their work and provide new opportunities, but also pose a threat to their job security and well-being (Savolainen et al., 2026).

How is it that the same technology can be used and produce vastly different results? This article states that it is not the technology, but leadership in implementing the technology. It is top managers who determine the use of AI, invest resources, and inform the change to employees (Bevilacqua et al., 2026). Their decisions can make AI a tool to enhance the workforce or a need to expand it. But most of the research so far has been on the uptake of AI and its consequences for the workforce, rather than on how leadership conditions relate to these two. The literature on leadership and AI is limited; most studies are conducted in Asia, Europe and the United States, and researchers often propose that AI will boost the positive impact of leadership.

This article builds a conceptual model to help understand the moderation effect of AI adoption on workforce transformation through strategic leadership. It makes three contributions. First, it combines three theories, the upper echelons theory, the dynamic capabilities theory, and the job demands–resources model, to explain how executives' decisions drive employee experience. Second, it implies that strategic leadership is a two-sided coin: the use of AI could be more intense and early, which can either help or hurt. Third, it suggests that this moderating effect is more pronounced in low resource settings, particularly in the emerging markets like Africa.

Furthermore, Constructs are outlined in Section 2 and a theoretical framework in Section 3. Section 4 discusses contextual variation and Section 5 derives six propositions. Section 6 discusses contributions and implications, Section 7 outlines limitations and a research agenda, and Section 8 presents the conclusion.

2. Conceptual Foundations

This framework consists of 3 constructs: Artificial Intelligence (AI) Adoption, Workforce Transformation, and Strategic Leadership. Each is explicitly bounded and has dimensions which can be measured in a subsequent empirical study. Adoption of AI and strategic leadership are constructs in the organisations, while workforce transformation is a construct in the organisations and employee outcomes.

2.1 Artificial Intelligence Adoption

AI adoption is measured by the extent to which an organisation integrates AI at various levels and functions in decision-making. Breadth is the range of use cases where AI is deployed; depth is the extent to which it has advanced beyond pilot projects and into day-to-day business and decision making. It is important to make the distinction because organisations may include “use AI” if only a handful of employees attempt to use the general-purpose tools. Diffusion is not homogeneous, as organisational factors, in addition to technological potential, and firms' willingness to use AI actively influence it (Bick et al., 2026).

Readiness is not a factor in the definition. Technological, organisational and environmental readiness are all prerequisites for the adoption of AI, and they are all part of using AI, if they are considered as dimensions of adoption, then this would be an amalgamation of the conditions for using AI and using AI. The use of AI is therefore viewed as a spectrum, ranging from experimentation to full-scale integration in organisations (Bankins et al., 2024).

2.2 Workforce Transformation

Workforce transformation is the reshaping of work, skills, employment and employee experience that follows the adoption of AI. It captures the structural changes in the impact of AI on work, as well as the psychological changes for the individual worker. There are four dimensions, each of which can be either positive or negative:

- Reconfiguration of skills: change in the skills needed by a workforce. 39% of core skills are projected to change by 2030, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF).
- Job redesign, reallocation of tasks between people and AI systems (Bonney et al., 2024; Tona et al., 2025).
- Employment change: changes in the size of the workforce and skills mix of workers (Li et al., 2025; Bick et al., 2026).
- The wellbeing of workers: (including engagement, felt job security and psychological strain) (Kim et al., 2025; Pinho et al., 2026).

Twenty-four empirical studies have been surveyed, and workers' experiences of these changes are mixed; they may feel more efficient, have new roles, but also less fair, less secure and less well. Twenty-four empirical studies have found support for the ambivalence of workers, seeing that

they feel both more efficient and have new roles, but also less fair, less secure and less well (Savolainen et al., 2026).

2.3 Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership is the power to influence, to set direction, allocate resources, establish culture and to lead change within an organization and its external environment (Finkelstein et al., 2009). This puts it in the context of chief executives and top management teams, as studied in upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), not supervisory leadership.

Bevilacqua et al. (2026) identified four interdependent skills that are essential for the AI era: an AI open mindset, AI strategic co-thinking, connecting organisational levels and managing ethical risk. The framework highlights three areas that can affect the impact of AI on the workforce, by means of strategic leadership:

- Visionary communication: communicating the "how" and "why" of how AI will be used, and positioning it as an opportunity, not a threat.
- Ethical oversight: setting guidelines for responsible, transparent and accountable use of AI and ensuring workers are protected from potential negative effects of AI.
- Calibrated involvement: appropriate degree and time of top management involvement.

There is a limited range of direct measures of strategic leadership in AI scenarios. Where they are not present, this article uses studies on transformational, ethical, digital, and change leadership as proxy evidence.

3. Theoretical Framework

There is no one single explanation that can explain the positive effect of AI investments on one workforce and the negative effect on another. This article combines three theories that focus on varying parts of the moderating process: who decides on the change, how resources are changed, and how employees react to the change.

3.1 Upper echelons theory - who shapes the outcome?

Organizations represent the beliefs, experiences and thought patterns of their senior executives (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). That is, if it's AI, top managers' understanding of AI will determine sponsored use, allocation of resources, and how they will communicate the change to employees. This is backed up by research on AI and leadership by top managers (Bevilacqua et al., 2025).

The theory also helps to explain the moderating effect of strategic leadership, rather than just predicting it. The power of top managers is not so much in how they use AI, as in the conditions under which they do. There may be some variation in how they use AI depending on the top managements decisions. In 558 product development projects with AI, the focus of senior management positively affected innovation quality, product innovativeness, and innovation speed (Zhang et al., 2026).

3.2 Dynamic capabilities theory: how resources are reconfigured

The theory is that firms can remain competitive if they can sense opportunities, make investments to seize them, and reconfigure their resources and routines (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). For AI, sensing is about identifying the opportunities to apply AI, dedicating budgets, data, and staff, and changing job design, staff training and decision-making processes.

These abilities don't develop naturally. Eleven microfoundations of generative AI (Gehlen et al., 2024; Höhener, 2024) are identified as strategic leadership, and a survey of 159 managers in Indonesia shows that digital leadership drives generative AI adoption and, in turn, increases competitive advantage (Afrianty et al., 2026). Thus, strategic leadership is a dynamic managerial ability that can be either workforce reconfiguration or replacement of technology for human work.

3.3 Job Demands-Resources Model: How employees experience the change

The job demands–resources (JD-R) model is a differentiation between job demands that employees must exert effort to achieve and job resources that help them reach goals and foster engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). AI can be either. Can be a resource if it provides something to remove from their daily routine and aids in decision-making, or demand if it makes them insecure about their job, forces continuous learning or increases their monitoring.

Both are indicated by the evidence. Technostress research argues that the same technology can be a cause of eustress or distress, depending on the way of its adoption (Tarafdar et al., 2019), while employee–AI collaboration is associated with an increase in engagement and WLB (Pinho et al., 2026). Thus, the moderation process is embedded in the employees' level processes of the JD-R model, for leaders' decisions will influence the employees' perception of using AI as a tool or a requirement.

3.4 An Integrated View

There are three theories, which form a chain. While each theory focuses on a specific component of the chain, upper echelons theory is concerned with who makes the decision, the dynamic capabilities theory is about what decision makers do with AI, and the JD-R model is about how the employees interpret the outcome. It's strategic leadership that connects the chain and determines the impact of AI on

the workforce. The claim is taken up in Section 5, in six propositions.

4. Contextual Variation

The connection between AI adoption and workforce change is influenced by economic, regulatory, and size disparities. Such differences change the type of compensation strategies leaders need to create and, consequently, the impact their decisions will have on workforce outcomes.

4.1 Economics and regulation: The advanced economies

There is inconsistent adoption even in advanced economies. The adoption of AI by firms, and by workers, is significantly higher in the United States than in Europe, and there is a strong association between workers' use of AI and the use of AI by their firms, as well as between the use of AI by firms and their personnel management practices (Bick et al., 2026). Sectors with more adoption have experienced more productivity growth, but, so far, no obvious employment consequences. Workforce impacts now are about tasks and skills instead of numbers.

The rules are becoming more and more the leader's role. The European Union Artificial Intelligence Act (EU AI Act) entered into force on 1st August 2024 and staff will be aware that there is a need to be AI-literate from 2nd February 2025 (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689). The Commission's Union of Skills (adopted in March 2025) contains a commitment to lifelong learning (European Commission, 2025). Thus, in Europe, the use of AI at work is becoming a legal obligation, while in most emerging economies, it is mainly a matter of judgement of the leaders.

4.2 Emerging African Economies

The World Development Report 2026 is the first broad analysis of AI's implications for developing economies (World Bank, 2026). An Africa-specific pattern of evidence is observed. 81% of African CEOs (vs. 59% of their global peers) stated that AI upskilling will have a direct impact on their organisations' success (KPMG, 2025). In 2026, however, only 14% reported that they were keeping pace with AI (compared to 66% globally), 82% reported that they were reshaping roles for AI and 59% reported that skills gaps were a concern (KPMG, 2026).

This is a kind of substitution logic: When there are limited resources and technical skills, leaders invest in what they have. This is manifested at the level of employees in Nigeria. Perceived AI threat was more strongly associated with job insecurity, whereas perceived organisational resilience was more strongly associated with non-threatening job security among the 348 manufacturing SME workers (Abdullahi et al., 2026). Leadership attitudes can be more important than AI.

4.3 Firm size and Organisational cases

There is also a parallel divide with regards to the size of the firms. The OECD conducted a survey of more than 5,000 SMEs across seven countries and found that 31% of SMEs are using generative AI, but half of these SMEs do not have AI skills within their staff, while only a minority of those using generative AI train employees in AI. A study by OECD (2025) shows that leadership is a key contributor to performance in large companies. In December 2025, FedEx launched an enterprise-wide AI literacy initiative for its workforce (FedEx, 2025), and Johnson & Johnson's AI-powered skills-inference platform aimed at forecasting future workforce requirements and identifying AI skill gaps (Tona et al., 2025). In both instances, it was a matter of building people, not replacing them and that was first.

5. Proposition Development

In this section six propositions are developed. The first sets the groundwork for the relationship; the next four describe how strategic leadership moderates the relationship; and the final describes why moderation is more important in resource-limited contexts. Moderate studies will be differentiated from supportive studies.

5.1. The Baseline: A Dual Effect

This is not about new jobs, it's about new work. It's not about new jobs, it's about new work. Some 27% of companies in the US reported that AI has displaced people's work, and only about 5% reported changes in employment (Bonney et al., 2024). Employment effects are non-uniform: Li et al. (2025) find that AI use in Chinese listed companies has a negative effect on low-skilled employment. This adoption also leads to insecurity as seen in Nigeria (Abdullahi et al., 2026) and in South Korea, it leads to decrease in psychological safety, thereby increasing depression (Kim et al., 2025).

> *Proposition 1: The use of AI is positively related to skill reconfiguration and job redesign, and positively related to employees' job insecurity and psychological strain.*

5.2 Visionary Communication & the Resource Path

Staff sense and perceive what their leaders are saying as AI. Opportunity framing by leaders leads to higher psychological capital in teams and adoption of AI, while threat framing by leaders leads to lower psychological capital in teams and adoption of AI (Xie et al., 2026). This is confirmed by the direct tests: The positive moderation between leadership and the effect of AI on performance and work engagement (Wijayati et al., 2022); and the moderating role of transformational leadership in the relationships between AI and job meaningfulness and turnover intentions (Shweta & Panicker, 2025). The results

of mediated effects in this study are also supported by the results of other studies (Quttainah et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). These studies examine lower-level leadership, and use this as a proxy for upper-level leadership; lower-level leadership is constrained by a clear upper-level leadership story, as suggested by upper echelons theory.

Proposition 2: Strategic leaders' visionary communication also further strengthens the positive relationship between AI adoption and skill reconfiguration and employee engagement.

5.3 The ethical oversight and the demand pathway

Communication helps to strengthen the resource path and gives ethical guidance to the demand path. Like the latter, perceived organisational resilience decreases job insecurity (Abdullahi et al., 2026), and ethical leadership, based on fairness, transparency and care, reduces the decrease in psychological safety after introducing AI (Kim et al., 2025). This is now formalised as a leadership responsibility in the European AI Act (Section 4.1).

Proposition 3: Unethical strategic leaders dilute the positive relationship between AI adoption and job insecurity and psychological strain experienced by the employees.

5.4 Calibrated Involvement: How Much Leaders Intervene?

Too much leadership is not necessarily a good thing. The association between the intensity of AI use and job insecurity is U-shaped, and moderated by transformational leadership (Fu & Zhang, 2026). There are two negative effects of heavy top down control. It can constrain experimentation, a route to dynamic capabilities. (Höhener, 2024). Positive affect was lower when AI was more involved in decisions made by leaders, especially when those decisions were positive: In an experiment with 153 workers, more involvement of AI in decisions made by leaders led to less positive affect, especially when the decisions made were positive (Lochner et al., 2025).

Proposition 4: The moderating effect of strategic leadership involvement is curvilinear: moderate involvement promotes positive impacts of AI adoption on workforce transformation, but too much involvement has an adverse effect.

5.5 Calibrated Involvement: Leaders intervening

The right intensity of leadership is likely to change over the course of implementation. Sensing and seizing are based on exploration and learning, and coordination and commitment are based on reconfiguration (Teece, 2007). Hence, facilitative leadership that provides the space for learning should be most critical in early experiments and directive leadership that provides resources and holds managers accountable should be most critical in scaling. Executives are busy people and when they participate is a strategic decision (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This has not been tested yet in any study and it is a theory, and thus requires testing in longitudinal studies.

Proposition 5: When implementing AI, strategic leadership is more beneficial at the experimentation stage, as facilitative involvement has a positive effect on workforce outcomes, and more beneficial at the scaling stage, as directive involvement has a positive effect on workforce outcomes.

5.6 Resource-Constrained Contexts

In less sophisticated areas, where there is less data and less AI literate workers, people decisions are more significant. This substitution logic is also apparent in the evidence from Africa and SMEs in Section 4: capacity development occurs through people where technology is scarce; and the threat perception of employees is more influential when formal protection is less developed.

Proposition 6: The moderating effects in P2–P5 are more pronounced in resource constrained environments, emerging and African economies and SMEs.

The propositions are summarized in Figure 1. The three aspects of strategic leadership (P2 to P5) have an impact on the four dimensions of workforce transformation (P1), the resource context condition the entire model (P6).

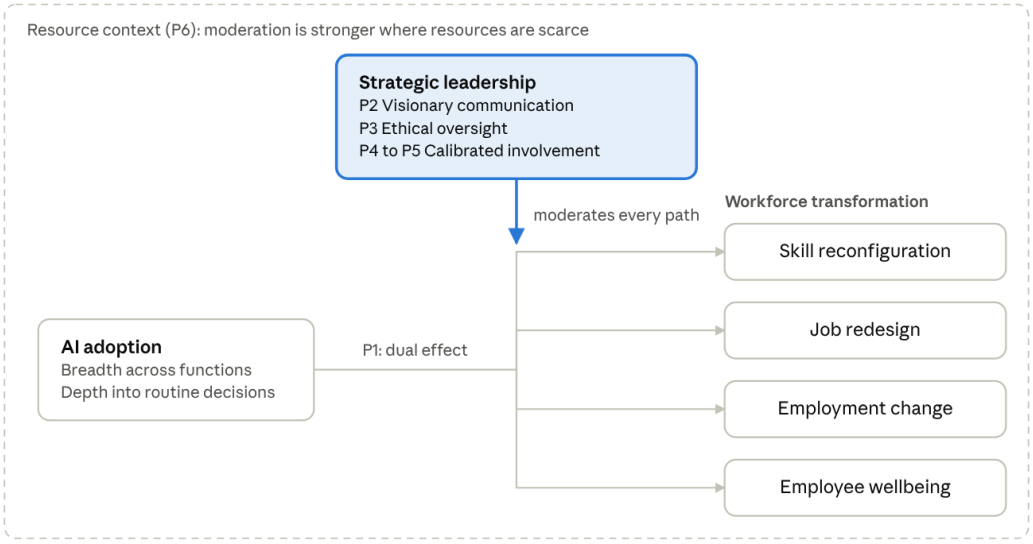


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework: the moderating role of strategic leadership (P1 to P6)*

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This article has four contributions. First, it's a shift from technology to leadership. Strategic leadership acts as a moderator in the relationship between AI and its effects on employment and wellbeing, which is why the impacts of AI on employment can vary significantly by context (Li et al., 2025; Bick et al., 2026), and evidence about the impacts of AI on wellbeing is ambiguous (Kim et al., 2025; Pinho et al., 2026).

Secondly, strategic leadership is bi-directional. The framework does not necessarily imply that leadership always increases the benefits of AI; rather, it identifies when leadership decreases the benefits of AI (P4 and P5). This is consistent with the findings of curvilinear effects (Fu & Zhang, 2026), and it might also explain why some studies on moderators fail to find clear moderation effects, as they only check to see whether the leadership is present or not, which may lead to the averaging of leadership effects.

Third, it combines the three theories at various levels and offers mechanisms for all propositions ranging from executive choice to employee experience. Fourth, it is a contribution to a literature, which is predominantly Euro-American and Asian, and in which the leadership has to do more in Africa and other developing economies.

6.2 Managerial Implications

1. Make investment decisions in leadership ability as well as in the infrastructure of AI. AI systems not designed for building top managers' AI literacy and change skills are unlikely to yield benefits for the workforce (Bevilacqua et al., 2026).

2. Describe an unambiguous narrative early on AI. Discuss the impact of AI on society. It is more likely to be perceived as an opportunity when the reasons behind the adoption and what aspects of the work will be affected by AI and how employees will be supported are explained (Xie et al., 2026).

3. Have ethical oversight as routine practice. If they are adopted before the rules are needed, by organisations or other countries outside Europe, it will decrease insecurity (Kim et al., 2025) and be transparent.

4. Match up commitment to the level of implementation. Conduct early pilots and transition to greater coordination and accountability with AI at scale.

5. Maintain individuals in the relational aspects of leadership. Maintain human recognition, feedback, and challenging conversations (Lochner et al., 2025).

The decision to retrain existing employees or replace them is strategic and moral for leaders of emerging economies and SMEs that lack the resources to make mistakes.

7.0 The limitations and future research directions

The evidence does not prove the propositions, and there are three limitations to the evidence. Many of the propositions are based on proxy measures of strategic leadership since few studies directly measure strategic leadership in AI contexts. Causal inferences are restricted, and it is possible that common method bias is a threat as most of the supporting studies are cross-sectional and self-reported. Evidence from Africa is primarily based on executive surveys and a few firm-level studies.

Each proposition is a design that is proposed for further study. There is a need for validated scales for the three

constructs, preferably in multi-source designs in which top-management reports are used along with employee surveys. Cross-level interactions should be tested for P2 and P3; for P4, squared terms and/or comparisons between low, moderate and high control should be tested; and for P5, longitudinal designs following organisations from pilot to scaled deployment should be tested. In comparative studies, advanced and emerging economies can be compared as well as large firms and SMEs with priority setting for Nigeria and other African economies in P6 (KPMG, 2026). These designs would be complemented with qualitative case studies of how top managers communicate about AI, oversee its use and decide when to intervene.

8. Conclusion

This article sought to explain why certain workforces are able to gain the benefits of AI while others are impacted. The impact of AI on the workforce isn't only technological, though. It relies on strategic leadership, including the dialogue and guidance that senior leaders give about AI, ethics, and the trajectory of their engagement as AI is adopted.

It integrates the top-tier theory, the DCT theory and the JDR theory to formulate a sequence ranging from executive decision making to employee experience. It gives rise to six propositions. AI's influence on the workforce is two-fold. A positive vision strengthens the positive path, a negative vision strengthens the negative path; positive ethical supervision weakens the negative path, negative ethical supervision weakens the positive path. There is an optimum level of leadership involvement beyond which it can become a constraint, and the impact of leadership involvement differs across different stages of implementation. Moderating effects are probably most pronounced in environments where resources are limited, e.g., in small businesses and newly developing economies in Africa.

The benefits of investing in AI infrastructure for practitioners come when combined with investing in leadership capability. The research agenda should involve testing of the propositions in multilevel, longitudinal and comparative designs, especially in emerging economies, where available evidence is scarce. Strategic leadership is, in essence, the key to the impact of AI on the workforce.

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