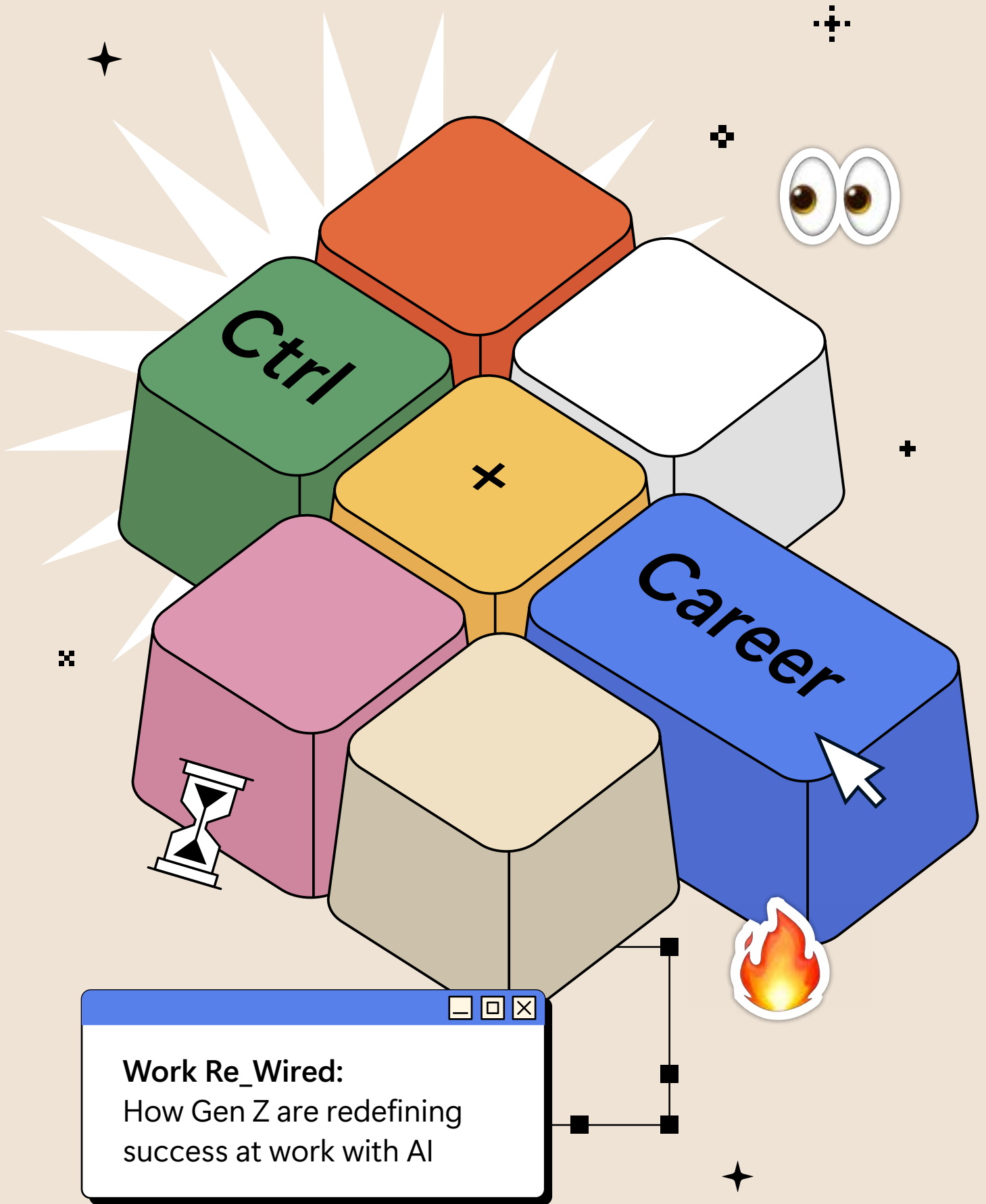
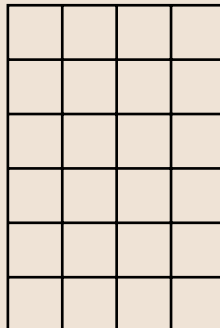
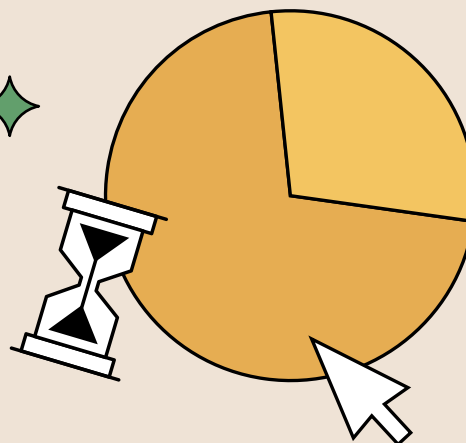




Contents



3	Introduction + Methodology
4	Critical Thinkers, not just AI Users
6	Fast Adopters, Big Transformers
8	Using AI as Your Personal Hype Squad
10	Mentorship, but Make It Mutual
12	Conclusion





Breaking the Mold: How Young Aussie Professionals Are Making AI Work for Them



In the buzz surrounding AI's rapid rise, headlines warn that Gen Z jobs are changing. Will companies cut back, betting that AI can do a fresh early-career professional's work? The question weighs on early career professionals, and the uncertainty is real.

When we looked beyond the headlines, speaking with Microsoft customers and surveying more than 575 young professionals across Australia, we found a more nuanced story.

This generation is navigating simultaneous optimism and career anxiety about the same technology. Many early-career professionals are trailblazing adopters, using AI to accelerate their careers. At the same time, they worry about what could be lost: learning depth, mentorship, and fair access to tools. What's emerging is forward thinking organisations are responding, empowering AI savvy early-career professionals and the unique value they bring.

In this research we set out to understand how the first AI fluent generation is reshaping work, and what leaders, managers and early-career talent can each do to support this shift. This report looks at how young professionals are using AI in human first, inventive ways. It also confronts the trade-offs and gaps that none of us can ignore.

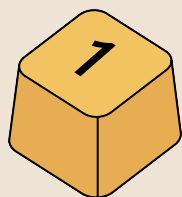
The takeaway is simple. Gen Z is not waiting for permission. They are rewriting the rules of success with AI and showing what the future of work can look like. The question for every leader and organisation is: are you ready too?



Methodology

This report is grounded in a YouGov study of 575 Australian workers aged 18–45, who responded between 15–27 August 2025. The sample includes an approximate 2:1 split between 18–28s (n=365) and 29–45s (n=210), with an industry focus of financial services, education, e-commerce, retail, healthcare, legal, professional services, technology, telecommunications and media and public sector.

Data in the study is weighted by age, gender and region to align with ABS population estimates. Differences are reported at the 95% confidence interval, and the study adheres to ISO 20252:2019.

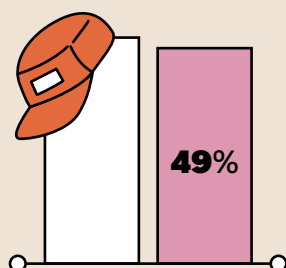


Critical Thinkers, not just AI users

Gen Z professionals are stepping into the workforce at a time when AI is both a launchpad and a looming worry. Their ambition is palpable – these digital natives are AI fluent and eager to make an impact from day one. However, there's also an undercurrent of anxiety: 71% of Gen Z professionals worry that AI could lead to fewer roles (a concern especially pronounced in finance, where 87% of young workers are concerned).

This generation isn't naive about AI's implications. They appreciate the boost: 88% say AI lets them spend less time on routine, repetitive tasks and more on strategic or creative work. But they're also asking hard questions about what might be lost when their days are filled with shortcuts. If AI is only used for quick answers, could it erode the deep learning and critical thinking that help young talent grow?

+

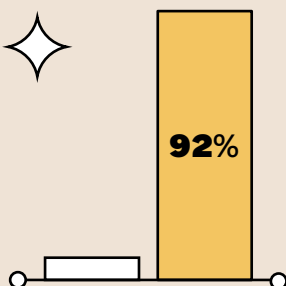


49% of Gen Z graduates say they don't learn new content as deeply since AI became part of their daily toolkit.

●

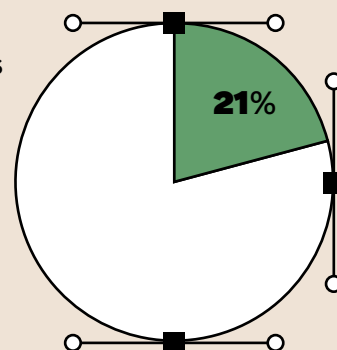


92% of early-career workers are confident in their ability to critically assess and challenge AI-generated outputs.



Nearly half (49%) feel they don't learn new content as deeply as they did before AI was part of their daily toolkit. Yet encouragingly, Gen Z is meeting this challenge, with almost all (92%) early-career workers confident in their ability to critically assess and challenge AI-generated outputs. This isn't about over confidence. Those who have developed frameworks and the right manager dynamic will build those critical capabilities. This means being the human check-and-balance, questioning suggestions, probing for better answers, and ensuring the final work passes their own quality bar.

21% of young workers lack access to AI tools at work, particularly in sectors like the public sector, healthcare, and education.



Still, access to AI isn't universal among young Aussies. While 30% of young workers say they are not given access to AI tools from their employer, some are allowed to use public tools (21%), raising organisational data security and confidentiality concerns.

Among young workers who say their employers prohibit AI use entirely, the hardest-hit industries are education and healthcare (14%), and the public sector (15%), which compares to just 2% in finance, telecom and tech. This digital divide is creating a two-speed workforce where some young employees race ahead with AI while others are left behind.

The ambition of young workers, combined with their thoughtful concern about AI's limitations, is sparking a new kind of career resilience. The early-career professionals who will thrive aren't those who simply use AI – they question it, experiment with it, and push its limits to learn more deeply.



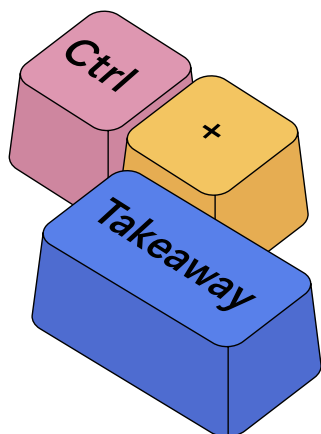
Real Use Case

Example

Jett Potter (MinterEllison) Challenging AI like a Pro

Jett Potter, a Senior Consultant and Lawyer at MinterEllison, pairs everyday legal work with an agent he's built to help him 'think like a senior consultant'. It helps critique his writing and logic before his bosses see it. As Jett describes it:

"I probably use Copilot for 95 percent of my day; it's up on my screen more than email or Teams. I have an email AI agent that refers to examples our partners consider top-notch, and another agent set up to think like a top-tier consulting partner. By the time I deliver a piece of work, I've already run it through multiple rounds of AI feedback, tweaking structure, tone and logic. The result? My drafts get knocked back less, because I've effectively pre-vetted them with these AI helpers before they ever hit my manager's desk."



For early-career professionals:

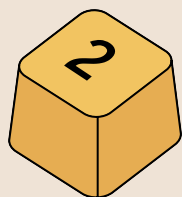
Continue using AI as a thought partner, not just an answer machine. Don't settle for surface-level outputs – interrogate AI's suggestions, test counter-arguments, and show your reasoning when presenting your work.

In meetings or email, make it a habit to mention, "I asked the AI for input, but here's where I challenged it and made my own call." This proves you're using AI to learn and deepen your expertise, not to shortcut the learning.

For leaders:

Provide equitable access to AI tools for your teams – no one should be left behind. Consider the shape of work in the age of AI and build those high demand core skills and capabilities so your team offload the rest to AI.

Then, coach young employees on how to use AI with rigor. Encourage them to document how they're prompting and double-checking AI, and to share what they overruled or revised.



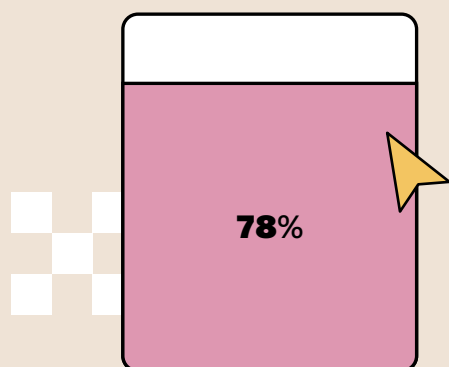
Fast Adopters, Big Transformers

When it comes to adoption, Gen Z is setting the pace. Seven in ten Gen Z employees are given an AI tool by their employer, and 97% of those use these tools at least weekly. They aren't treating AI as a novelty; it's woven into how they work. And the comfort level shows: this generation often dives in head-first, exploring new features and experimenting with AI in new ways.



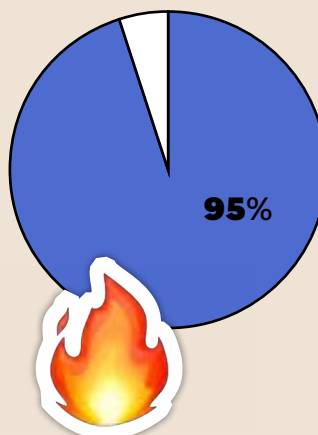
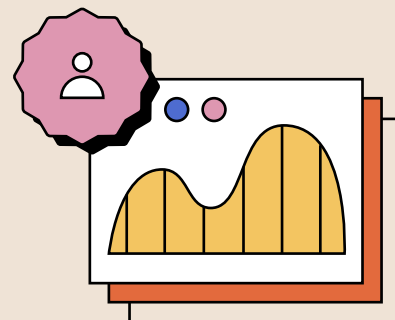
Seven in ten Gen Z employees have AI tools at their disposal at work.

But Gen Z isn't just using the tools – they're actively leading the AI charge within their organisations. Our research found that 78% of Gen Z workers have introduced a new AI tool, workflow, shortcut, or prompt "hack" to their team that was later adopted by others.



78% Gen Z workers introduced a new AI "hack" to their team.

See a chance to automate a tedious task with an AI script? They'll try it. Find a cool prompt to speed up a workflow? They'll share it. It's often the youngest employees who are the internal evangelists for new AI-driven ways of working. The call to leaders is simple: if your entry-level hire shows the whole team a smarter way to work, use it as an innovation multiplier.



95% of young workers in finance say their AI tips were embraced by the team.

What's more, early-career professionals aren't stopping at ready-made tools. Over six in ten have gone a step further – building or customising an AI agent, chatbot, or automated workflow to handle parts of their job. This willingness to tinker is ushering in the 'agent boss' era, a hallmark of the *Frontier Firm*. Gen Z's knack for personalising technology is setting them up as co-creators of the next wave of transformation. Their comfort in automating and iterating will be paramount as businesses move beyond basic automation into more autonomous, intelligent systems.



Real Use Case

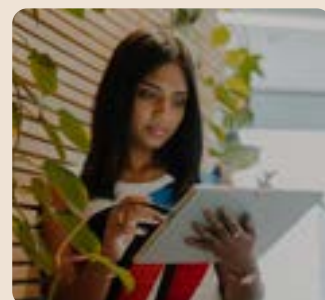
Example

Courtney Withers & Eesha Chowdary Divi (Microsoft)

Courtney Withers, a recently promoted early career professional at Microsoft, built an AI agent to automate a tedious sales task: compiling client update emails.

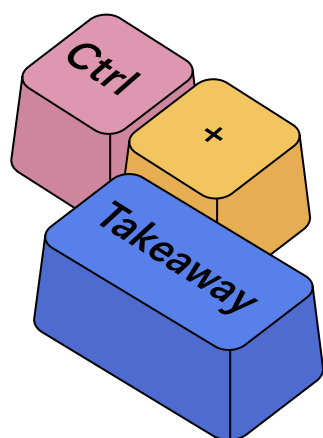


Across the hall, Eesha Chowdary Divi, an AI Workforce Solutions Specialist, created a Gen Z agent with Copilot studio, helping new hires navigate tone, format and everyday "how-to" questions:



"I would say it saves me two hours a week, which sounds shocking, but keeping your CRM up to date is a lot of overhead in sales roles, so it works well for me. I also shared the agent with my team, and some of them have been using it too."

"I often find myself tapping the shoulders of my colleagues, and it's sometimes for questions that are so simple that an agent could answer. I wanted to focus my time with them on really meaningful things like accelerating my career development plan or training on tools and processes."



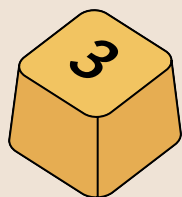
For early-career professionals:

Keep leading by example. When you find an AI workaround, don't keep it to yourself – *package it and promote it*. Document what problem it solves and show a before-and-after. By sharing a one-pager "how-to" or offering a quick demo to your team, you turn a personal hack into a company-wide improvement.

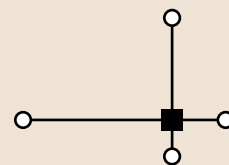
If your manager is open, pilot your solution on a small project and measure the impact (time saved, errors reduced). This not only helps colleagues, but it also builds your reputation as an innovator who takes initiative.

For leaders: Rather than just trying to mandate innovation from the top, enable your Gen Z innovators from the bottom-up. When a junior employee comes up with a clever solution, celebrate it and make it visible – could you add their agent to a company knowledge base or give them a shout-out in a team meeting?

Providing channels for these grassroots solutions creates an innovation multiplier across the organisation.



Using AI as Your Personal Hype Squad



For today's early-career professionals, AI is more than a productivity hack – it's also a personal coach in their corner. In fact, a growing share of young workers now treat AI as their go-to learning tool: nearly four in ten (38%) say AI is the first place they turn when they need to learn something new at work.

Our research also shows the tangible impact on their confidence and growth. We found that 79% of Gen Z workers say AI helps them communicate more professionally at work. Instead of sending a draft full of rough edges, they can now have AI refine the tone or catch mistakes – so the version their boss sees is sharper. Likewise, 74% feel more confident presenting their ideas after using AI to help them prepare, and 72% feel more empowered to learn and solve problems independently. These are important gains: by handling the initial grunt work or nerves (like practicing a presentation), AI is allowing young employees to step up and show their best selves at work.



Meanwhile, their AI skills aren't going unnoticed. Eight in ten say their AI proficiency has boosted their visibility within the company, and 81% say they've gained more influence in shaping decisions and strategy as a result. It makes sense – if you consistently deliver high-quality work with the help of AI and even come with data-backed insights or well-vetted options, you'll likely find yourself invited into bigger meetings or asked for your opinion more often.

However, the "hype squad" has its limits, and Gen Z knows it. While they lean on AI for a confidence boost, they also rely on the important role that managers play, particularly when the stakes are higher. For example, when navigating tricky team dynamics or risky topics, the majority still turn to their managers first (64%) rather than AI. They value the real-world experience and nuanced judgment a senior colleague brings. But for lower-stakes reassurance – say, "*Is my analysis solid?*" or "*How can I improve this slide deck?*" – a significant cohort (40%) looks to AI first when they lack confidence or want feedback.

AI is helping them take on challenges that might have been intimidating otherwise, but they're not abandoning the value of real human relationships and team learning. Instead, they're integrating the two, leaning on AI for a boost – and knowing when to lean on human judgment for the final call.

How Young Workers Benefit from AI

Professional communication **79%**

Quality & accuracy **76%**

Confidence in presenting **74%**

Independent problem-solving **72%**





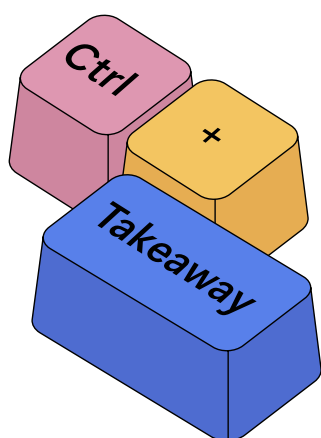
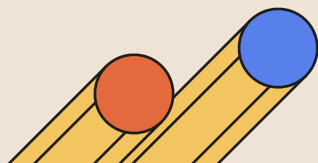
Real Use Case

Example

Kiara Morris (MinterEllison)

Kiara Morris, a young lawyer at MinterEllison, uses Copilot to prepare for client meetings and court appearances, rehearsing tough questions or potential objections.

"Usually, as a junior, you don't get a lot of opportunities to be presenting in court. My ability to use AI to start anticipating the types of questions that might arise during proceedings has helped me develop my confidence."



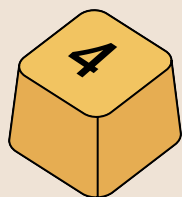
For early-career professionals:

Use AI to *practice, polish, and probe*. Before a presentation or a difficult task, run through it with AI – have it challenge your argument, ask it to proofread and fact-check your work, or simulate Q&A to stress-test your ideas. But also know when to pull in your manager or team: for example, after you've done an AI dress rehearsal, you might approach your mentor and say, "I tried this with AI and got these results – what do you think?"

Showing that you did your homework with AI *and* still value their expertise strikes the perfect balance.

For leaders: Encourage your young talent to use AI as a first draft and rehearsal tool, so that meetings and check-ins start at a higher baseline. Normalise the idea that it's great for a junior employee to come to you after iterating with AI – you can then discuss the strategic, high-level aspects rather than copy edits. This not only improves the work, it teaches them discernment.

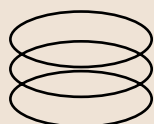
Most importantly, remain present and approachable for the areas where your experience and insight is highly valued – interpersonal dynamics, navigating complex and high-stake situations.



Mentorship, but make it mutual

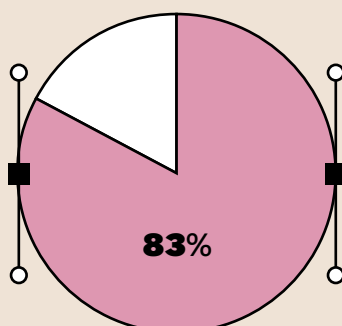


Traditionally, mentorship has flowed in one direction: experienced seniors guiding the newbies. But with AI shaking up how we all work, mentorship is becoming a two-way street. Savvy leaders are recognising that their youngest team members often have the freshest handle on emerging tech. As a result, they're asking juniors for help – and it's breaking down old hierarchies in a healthy way.



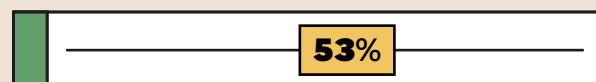
According to our survey, 83% of early-career professionals say a senior leader has asked them for input or ideas on how AI could be used at work. That's an overwhelming majority of Gen Z employees mentoring upwards, at least when it comes to AI skills. What might this look like? Perhaps a director asks a junior analyst, "How are you using Copilot to speed up research?" or "Can you show me how you set that Excel automation?" These moments signal a shift: the flow of knowledge is now bi-directional and driving a new culture dynamic.

83% of early-career professionals say a senior leader has asked them for input or ideas on how AI could be used at work.

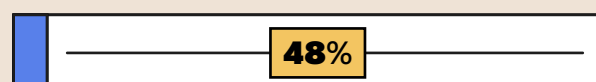


Importantly, while it's *more common* in tech-centric industries – e.g., young workers in tech (70%) or media/telecom (64%) are called on by leaders seeking their AI input, other industries aren't far behind, such as healthcare or government (around 40%). Across the board, the door is opening for juniors to share their expertise. And it turns out, these interactions are win-win.

About half of surveyed respondents say that their guidance gave the leader a better understanding of the AI process (53%) and even the confidence to start using AI tools themselves (48%). Think about that: a brief reverse-mentoring session can turn a skeptical executive into an AI champion.



53% say their guidance gave leaders a better understanding of the AI process.



48% say it gave leaders the confidence to start using AI tools themselves.

However, a generational divide is emerging over what's most important for career advancement in the age of AI. Gen Z are more likely to say traditional experience and tenure is more important for career progression than Millennials (21% compared to 15%), and Millennials are more likely to say mastering new technologies like AI is more important than Gen Z (39% compared to 29%). While Gen Z are leading the AI charge, they know AI is not enough on its own – they're actively looking to more experienced colleagues to round out their judgment and growth.

The takeaway for organisations is clear: multigenerational learning is the future. The best teams will mix the craft built over time from seasoned workers with the digital agility of newcomers. We're seeing the rise of a *mutual mentorship* model, where juniors teach seniors about AI, and seniors coach juniors on the subtleties of the business, strategy, and leadership. This dynamic creates a powerful cycle of knowledge sharing.

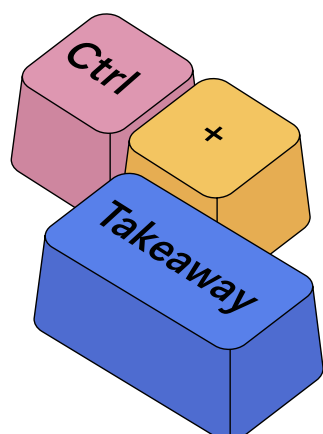
Real Use Case

Example

Hyejun Park (Grant Thornton)

Hyejun Park, a junior auditor in Grant Thornton's Sydney office, recently found herself in a role-reversal moment with her manager, improving his understanding and willingness to incorporate it into their workflows.

"I was experimenting with an AI review tool that flagged anomalies in financial records. At first, my manager wasn't sure about trusting AI. But after I showed him how I used it, his reaction was 'Keeping using that'. Now, it's a part of how the team works together."



For early-career professionals:

See every question from a senior colleague about AI as *an opportunity*. If a leader asks, "How could we use AI for X?", don't just tell them – show them. Prepare a quick demo or a success story: for instance, "*Here's a prompt I use, here's what it produces, and here's how much time it saved us.*"

By bringing a concrete example, you make it easy for busy leaders to grasp the value and maybe even try it themselves. Stepping up as a teacher not only helps your organisation, it positions you as a go-to person for innovation. That's career-enhancing.

For leaders: Create a culture where asking juniors for tech help is seen as smart, not shameful. Signal that you value your younger team members' input by actively seeking it. You might set up "AI idea exchanges" or mutual mentorship opportunities where early-career and seasoned employees can learn from one another.

Embracing mutual mentorship doesn't weaken authority; on the contrary, it shows strong leadership and a commitment to continuous learning. Everyone wins: leaders get more tech-savvy, and juniors feel they have a seat at the table.

So, what's the key insight?

Gen Z is not just surviving the AI upheaval in workplaces – they're thriving and driving change. Our research reveals a generation turning fear into forward momentum: they are simultaneously *learners* and *teachers*, leveraging AI for routine tasks but doubling down on human judgment where it counts.

As organisations, if we empower this generation with the right tools, access and guidance, we create a multiplier: AI-augmented talent delivering great results and continuously learning, which in turn encourages more innovation.

The future of work will be written by those who blend technological savvy with critical thinking and collaboration.



The message of Ctrl + Career is clear: the control of one's career remains firmly in human hands – AI is just helping the next generation press ahead faster and smarter toward success.

