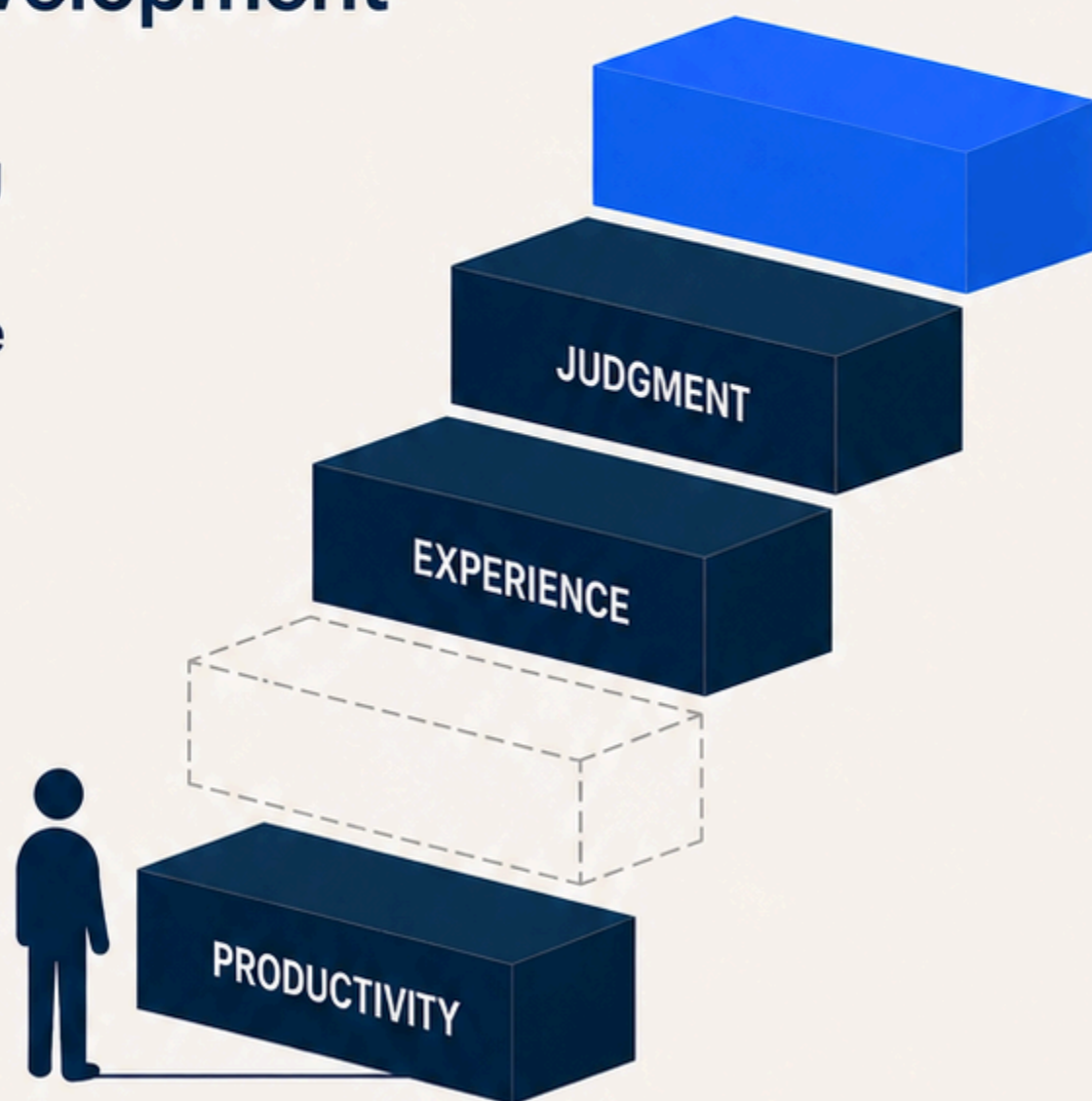


THE MISSING FIRST RUNG

Emerging signals on Gen Z, AI and early-career development

Organizations are redesigning work faster than they are redesigning how young people become capable.



THE QUESTION BEGAN IN THE ROOM.

During two sessions at the 2026 Annual Meeting of New Champions, leaders and young people repeatedly returned to questions about early-career learning, human contribution and the changing value of experience when AI becomes part of everyday work.

QUESTION 01

What happens to early-career learning when AI compresses the tasks through which people traditionally gained experience?

QUESTION 02

How should organizations evaluate human contribution when AI is involved in producing the work?

These did not feel like isolated youth concerns. They pointed to a wider leadership problem: companies are accelerating workflows, but many have not yet redesigned the development system underneath them.



The research project developed following two sessions contributed at the 2026 Annual Meeting of New Champions in Dalian.

This is an independently produced research note. It does not represent an official World Economic Forum study or institutional endorsement.

WHAT WE ARE SEEING— AND WHAT WE ARE NOT CLAIMING YET

This note is designed to identify emerging tensions and questions worth testing. It is not intended to produce representative claims about an entire generation.

CURRENT EVIDENCE

Five structured conversations with early-career professionals have been converted into anonymized evidence cards and case studies. One additional strategic peer conversation has been used to challenge the framing and identify possible sample bias.

WHAT THIS NOTE CAN SUPPORT

The cases can reveal recurring experiences, tensions and organizational questions. They can show how particular young professionals are using AI, what they fear losing and where current development systems appear incomplete.

WHAT THIS NOTE DOES NOT CLAIM

The sample is exploratory and currently overrepresents ambitious, internationally exposed and relatively high-agency young people. Survey responses are not yet being used to make percentage-based claims or statements about “what Gen Z wants.”



Participant details have been generalized to reduce identifiability.
Public case language is paraphrased unless quotation consent is confirmed.

01

THE PROBLEM MAY NOT BE JOB LOSS. IT MAY BE TASK MISALLOCATION.

Some low-learning work remains manual, while experiences that once helped junior employees build context, judgment and pattern recognition are being accelerated or removed.

ANONYMIZED FIELD CASE

The consultant who wanted AI to remove the right work

An early-career consultant described using AI to process large document sets, support research and accelerate drafting.

Yet one of the tasks she most wanted automated—manually checking whether files were missing between different folders—remained untouched.

At the same time, she worried that using AI on more developmental work could reduce the repeated exposure through which junior professionals learn to recognize when something is wrong.

Source: Anonymized interview YI001

A THREE-PART TASK DECISION

AUTOMATE

Repetitive work with little perceived learning value.

File reconciliation • Formatting • Routine reporting

AUGMENT WITH SAFEGUARDS

Work where AI creates speed, but the employee must still verify and explain the result.

Research • Drafting • Initial synthesis

PROTECT OR REDESIGN

Experiences that build future judgment, context and accountability.

Diagnosing problems • Defending recommendations • Making trade-offs

QUESTION FOR LEADERS

Which junior tasks should disappear—and which experiences must remain because they build the judgment the organization will need later?

02

BETTER OUTPUT CAN HIDE WEAKER OWNERSHIP.

AI can accelerate the production of a deliverable before the employee has developed the ability to explain, defend or modify the work.

ANONYMIZED FIELD CASE

Producing faster than you understand

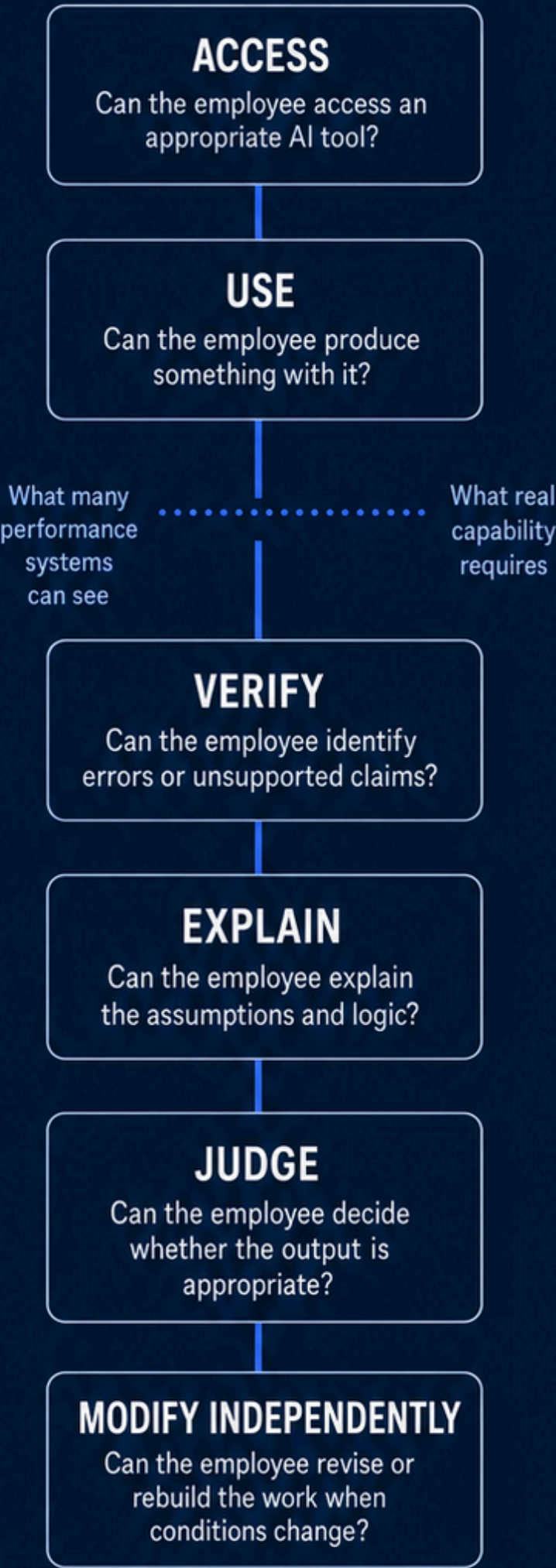
A young consultant needed to build a complex financial model for an enterprise AI platform. He had never built that kind of model before.

AI helped him move quickly from zero to a usable first draft. The output looked credible.

But when a senior colleague questioned the assumptions and logic behind the model, he could not fully answer.

He had produced the artifact faster than he had developed ownership of the reasoning behind it.

Source: Anonymized interview Y1005



AUTOMATE THE LOW-LEARNING TASK. INTERROGATE THE HIGH-STAKES OUTPUT.

Can the employee explain the assumptions, challenge the output and revise the work without simply asking AI to try again?

03 RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT THE SAME AS DEVELOPMENT.

Young employees may accept broad responsibilities and intense work when they can see how the experience increases their capability. The relationship changes when breadth becomes fragmentation.

ANONYMIZED FIELD CASE

When a stretch role stopped developing her

A young technical professional initially valued a role that combined programming, project coordination, reporting and stakeholder communication. The breadth exposed her to almost an entire project lifecycle and increased her confidence that she could handle unfamiliar problems.

Later, overlapping authority relationships and unrelated task assignments turned that breadth into fragmentation. When she could no longer see what capability or ownership the work was building, she completed the remaining assignment and left.

Source: Anonymized interview YI004

DEVELOPMENTAL BREADTH

Different experiences combine into stronger capability.

- 1. Clear developmental purpose
- 2. Increasing ownership
- 3. Exposure to a meaningful system
- 4. Feedback and reflection
- 5. Portable capability

FRAGMENTED OVERLOAD

Different people assign disconnected work without a coherent pathway.

- 1. Conflicting priorities
- 2. Unclear authority
- 3. More task volume
- 4. Little time for reflection
- 5. No credible future option

YOUNG EMPLOYEE PROVIDES

Effort + adaptability + responsibility



ORGANIZATION PROVIDES

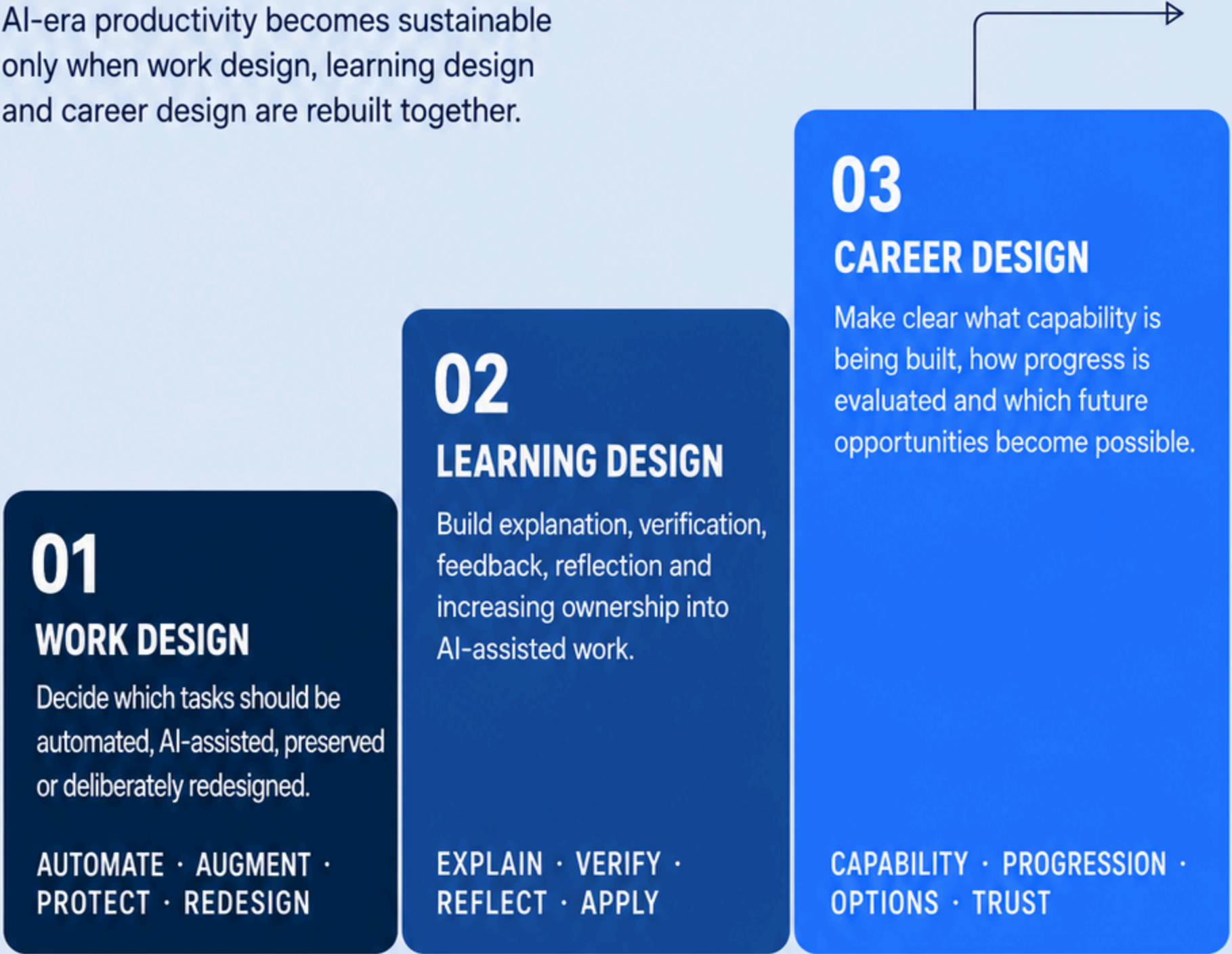
Capability + ownership + credible future options

After completing this assignment, what will the employee be capable of doing that they could not do before?

THE MISSING FIRST RUNG IS THE SYSTEM THAT TURNS WORK INTO CAPABILITY.

AI-ENABLED
PRODUCTIVITY THAT
ALSO BUILDS
FUTURE CAPABILITY

AI-era productivity becomes sustainable only when work design, learning design and career design are rebuilt together.



01 Are we automating low-learning work—or developmental experience?	02 Can young employees explain and modify what AI helps them produce?
03 What capability does each “stretch” assignment actually build?	04 Are productivity gains creating ownership—or simply more work?

THE NEXT PHASE

THIS IS AN EMERGING RESEARCH AGENDA— NOT A FINISHED ANSWER.

The next phase will continue testing how AI is changing early-career learning, evaluation, motivation and career confidence across different sectors and regions. I am particularly interested in experiences that support, complicate or contradict the signals presented in this note.

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

Share an anonymized experience of how AI is changing your work, learning or career expectations.

LEADERS AND MANAGERS

Contribute an organizational challenge, management practice or early-career development case.

ORGANIZATIONS

Explore a closed research briefing, leadership roundtable or diagnostic conversation.

PARTICIPANT COMMITMENT

Research participants will receive the final research output and a summary of the patterns emerging across the project. All public cases will be anonymized.



CONTRIBUTE TO THE RESEARCH

Approximately five minutes

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What must organizations redesign before the first rung disappears?