Unlocking the Promise of AI for Black Learners and Workers

As AI transforms society, this population-specific spotlight examines Black learners' and workers' experiences with and perceptions of AI and explores the potential impact of AI on the Black community.

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Contents

Introduction 3

Innovation and Entrepreneurship 5

Education and Training 9

Career Navigation and Social Capital 14

Access to Technology and Talent Pathways 18

Risks and Opportunities 23

An Opportunity to Build on the Momentum 27

Appendix 32

- Methodology 33
- Authors and Acknowledgements 34

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is evolving rapidly, transforming how we learn, work, and live on an unprecedented scale. At Jobs for the Future (JFF), we believe that AI has the potential to accelerate economic advancement for everyone—but only if it is intentionally designed to do so. Previous technological revolutions have impacted different communities unevenly, and some populations have been left behind. With the introduction of autonomous and agentic AI systems, it's more critical than ever to ensure that we all benefit from the AI revolution. Building on a March 2025 JFF report titled *AI for Economic Opportunity and Advancement*, we have set out to explore the potential impact of AI on specific U.S. populations, especially those facing a steep climb in our labor market, with the goal of ensuring that AI benefits us all.

In this brief, we spotlight the Black community—a demographic group that, according to research undertaken for the March 2025 JFF report, is already highly engaged with AI. We highlight insights shared by the Black participants in a national survey and by members of focus groups we conducted with Black learners and workers to gauge their perceptions of and experiences with AI. We also share the views and perspectives that AI experts in a range of sectors expressed in interviews with JFF.

(See the appendix of this report for more details about our research methodology.)

We examine how Black individuals in the U.S. perceive and experience the impacts of AI, and explore the potential ways in which the Black community could benefit from AI as this new technology continues to evolve. Finally, we highlight steps that workforce and education practitioners, investors, employers, and policymakers can take to ensure that AI benefits everyone.

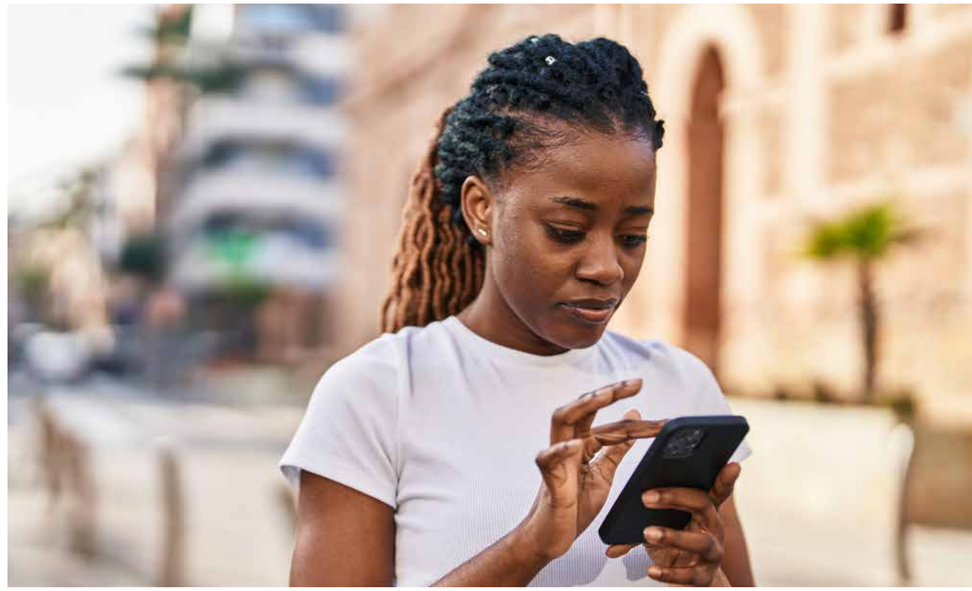
Our analysis shows that the potential for AI to propel Black Americans forward is significant, and there's a great deal of momentum to build on. A few key findings from our survey illustrate this momentum:

- **A large majority (83%) of the 529 survey respondents who identified as Black or African American said they're familiar with AI**, compared to 75% for the total sample of 2,754 people of all demographic backgrounds. And reported familiarity with AI was higher among Black males and Black respondents age 16 to 34.
- **More than half (53%) of Black respondents said that they use AI tools regularly** (daily or weekly), compared to 39% of all respondents; within the cohort of Black respondents, regular use is higher among males than females.

- **The share of Black respondents who said they're paying for the AI tools they use is almost twice as large** as share of all respondents who said they're paying for their AI tools (18% vs. 10%), and a higher percentage of Black respondents than overall respondents said they have **access to employer- or school-provided paid AI tools and/or training.**
- **Findings also indicate that Black learners and workers are more optimistic than members of other groups about AI and its potential for impact.** A majority of Black respondents said that they feel AI does more good than harm, both at a local community level (52% vs. 42% overall) and for society as a whole (54% vs. 45% overall).

Our findings reveal a significant opportunity: the Black community is not just engaged with AI, but leading in its adoption and eager to shape its future. To take advantage of this momentum and ensure that AI fully realizes its potential to become a catalyst for economic advancement for all, swift and intentional action is critical to hold all stakeholders accountable for addressing existing gaps and challenges.

Read on for discussions of five themes that emerged as we explored our data and findings: AI's potential to drive innovation and entrepreneurship; the need to expand access to AI education and training; AI's role in enhancing career navigation and creating new ways to build social capital; the need for broader access to emerging technologies and pathways to AI leadership; and the risks that must be addressed to ensure that AI will have a positive impact within the Black community and throughout the economy.

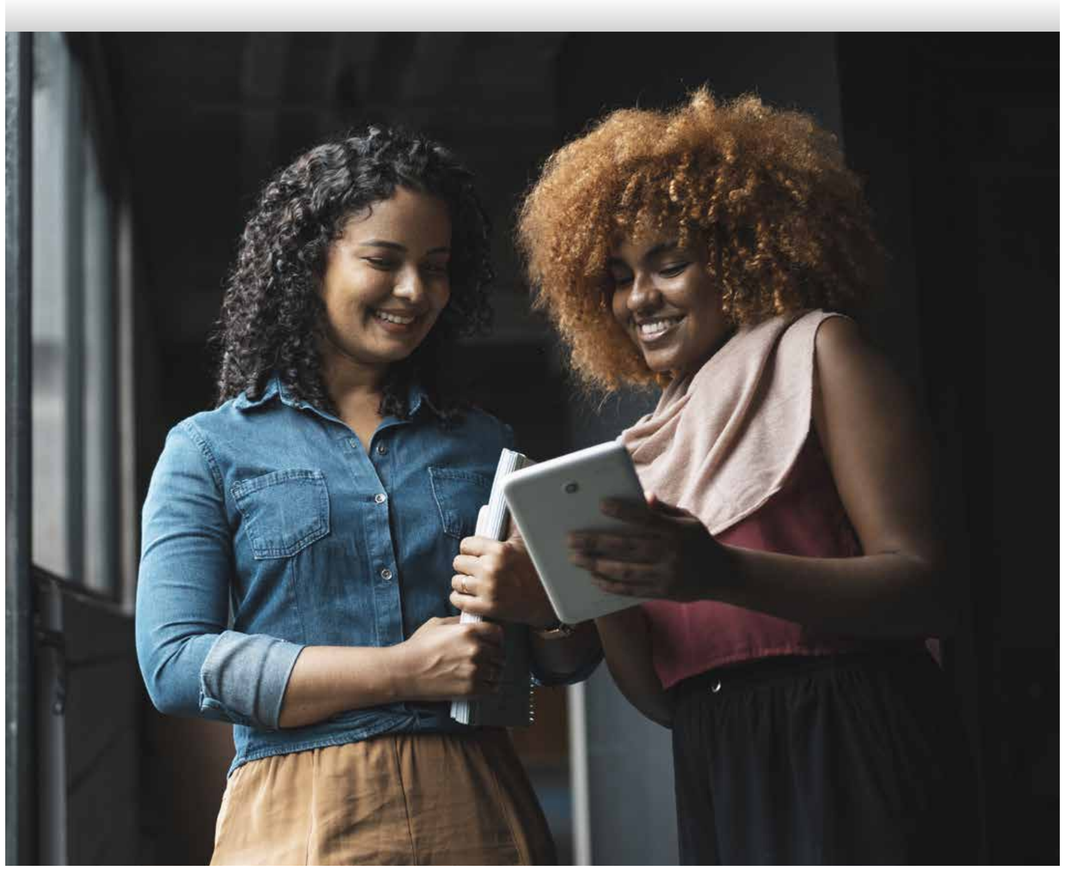


Innovation and Entrepreneurship

As AI reshapes the occupational landscape, entrepreneurship provides an avenue for building livelihoods. Our research shows that Black learners and workers are highly engaged with AI, and some are particularly engaged around entrepreneurship and small business creation. Notably, 15% of Black respondents said they have used AI to start or grow a business, significantly higher than the 8% observed in the total sample. One focus group participant shared a comment that illustrated this trend, saying, "I have a side business, and I use AI to create social media posts—the narrative for it. That drives engagement for my business."

AI experts we spoke with echoed the optimism expressed by survey respondents, especially regarding the role AI can play in accelerating opportunities for entrepreneurship and wealth creation in the Black community. Stefan Youngblood, founder and CEO of the Black AI Think Tank and the National Black AI Literacy Group, noted a spectrum of responses in the Black community, ranging from initial reluctance and fear rooted in bias, to "guarded but passionate enthusiasm" as they embrace the evolution of AI. "We see AI and entrepreneurship not just as a way out, but a way forward," he said. "It's how we build lasting wealth, health, and equity for our children and grandchildren, and a more beautiful, just future."

"We see a whole new world of opportunity when we're talking about AI. When our folks experience AI, vs. only being taught AI, they blast off," Youngblood added. He highlighted two Black leaders as AI pioneers: Willonius Hatcher, a comedian, filmmaker, and AI storyteller recognized as one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in AI in 2024; and Tiffani Martin, a blind entrepreneur recognized by *Black Enterprise* and



SUCCESS magazines who creates AI-powered solutions for people with disabilities as CEO of VisioTech. Both are members of the Black AI Think Tank.

Joe Paul, founder and CEO of OptimaNova AI, which provides AI training and develops AI solutions for specific business uses, said, "Under-resourced, historically marginalized communities are much more creative around the usage of [AI], primarily because historically they've had to do more with less and, in many cases, something with nothing."

"The learning curve is nonexistent—they're able to grasp it like this," he added, snapping his fingers. Paul said he's excited about the possibilities. "AI will improve our quality of life because . . . it will free us up to be more innovative and creative in the solutions we're providing for our families and for our work," he said.

Likewise, Brandon Nicholson, CEO of the Hidden Genius Project, a nonprofit that trains and mentors young Black men in technology creation, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills, said he has observed a great deal of ingenuity among young people, especially those who live in communities with limited access to services and resources, and he adds that others should follow their lead. "Young people have a way of understanding where they are and where they're going," he said. "They are imagining a world as they enter the workforce in which half of what we're clinging on to trying to save isn't going to help them. They're actually getting down to the brass tacks of what they need to learn, understand, and build on. And we're going to have to open our hearts and minds to their lens to understand what factors are actually shaping the emerging experiences as [AI] continues to evolve."

Rather than focus on what members of some communities stand to lose because of AI's growth, leaders throughout the education, workforce, and technology sectors must look at AI's potential through an asset-based lens. If we do that, Nicholson said, we have "an opportunity to expand our collective imagination . . . to focus our perspective on what individuals are positioned to contribute and build."

Maximizing opportunity to harness AI to empower entrepreneurs in the Black community requires providing access to education and training (discussed in more detail below) as well as access to capital and structured supports—both financial and social. Access to capital is especially important because, as Paul said, "Less than 1% of venture capital goes to Black founders. That's an economic failure."

And just as critical as financial capital is professional social capital—the personal connections that people need to open doors to opportunity. Solomon Abiola, an expert in AI and machine learning who advises entrepreneurs and builds AI systems, stressed the importance of "people

capital" and the need for venture capitalists (VC) to facilitate connections for entrepreneurs, not just invest in their businesses. "Good VCs [provide] money and connections," he said. "A good business keeps itself alive because it has customers," so investors need to make introductions with that in mind.

Paul made a similar point, pointing out that, beyond initial seed funding, entrepreneurs need sustained investment and support structures such as "ongoing mentoring, strategic partnerships, and long-term financial planning resources as essential components for sustained success."

Recommendations:

- Increase access to capital for business founders who are members of populations that are underrepresented in entrepreneurship through ongoing investment and structured support, and facilitate connections that will lead them to ongoing opportunities.
- Invest in accelerators, incubators, and other initiatives that build community across a wide range of founders and that provide coaching and support with capacity-building at the startup stage.
- Train entrepreneurs to use AI to start and grow businesses, build wealth, create jobs, and invest in their communities.

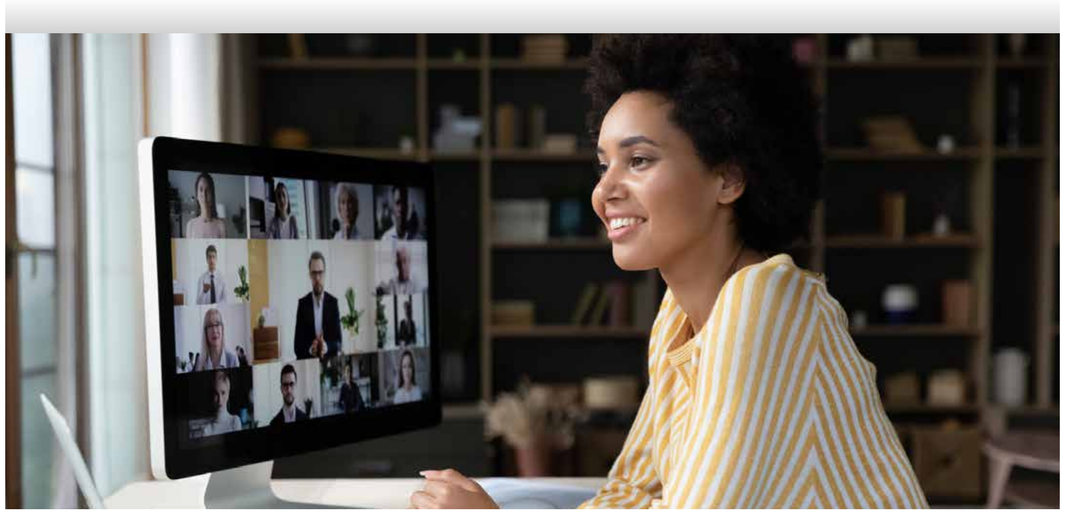
Education and Training

Another resounding theme across our findings is a need for access to AI education and training—including programs that cover both the fundamentals of AI tools as well as more advanced topics like how to create new solutions with AI and how to lead AI-related organizations and initiatives. In our survey, Black learners and workers indicated that they're eager to learn more about AI and are taking steps to do so, despite some obstacles: 66% of Black respondents said they want to increase their familiarity with and use of AI, compared with 48% of all respondents. And Black male respondents were more likely than Black female respondents to express interest in learning about AI (75% vs. 56%). However, Black respondents also said barriers are curbing their ability to pursue education and training; the top deterrents they reported were limited time (cited by 31%), high costs (31%), and lack of access to tools (26%).

Compared with the overall sample, Black respondents were also more likely to say that they seek information about AI from social media (51% vs. 37% overall), and to report that they find social media the most useful source of information (44% vs. 30% overall). These findings varied by age, with younger Black respondents more likely to report using social media and its usefulness. And regarding education and training programs in particular, 53% of Black learners and workers said that they found AI training to be effective, compared with 35% of all respondents. In addition, just 22% of Black respondents said they hadn't received any AI training, compared with 38% overall.

These findings warrant further exploration, but they point to an opportunity to build on the momentum of the Black community's experiences and enhance AI education and training for everyone by improving these programs and making them accessible to all.

Several of the experts we interviewed said AI education and training should be universal, and should start as early as possible. Taylor Shead, founder and CEO of Stemuli, a company that develops AI-driven education and training solutions, recommended an approach that emphasizes "prevention over intervention"—and that requires efforts to integrate AI curriculum into



K-12 public education. “Equity and access mean meeting people where they are—going to the systems Black learners and workers are in,” she said.

AI education and training programs also need to cover a range of skills and concepts to position everyone to build and contribute to AI, and to help those who are behind to catch up. “Black students are woefully behind with regard to opportunities for computer science education,” said Dwana Franklin-Davis, CEO of Reboot Representation, which invests in efforts to increase the number of Black, Latine, and Native American women and girls who excel in tech careers. “Now more than ever, we need to push [computer science] even earlier for kids and then layer on things like machine learning, data science, and other aspects that are fundamental to AI as part of their education.”

Making AI education and training universal will involve expanding training opportunities for teachers, whose knowledge of AI has a direct impact on their students’ engagement. “Educators in K-12 and higher education don’t necessarily have understanding and expertise around AI,” said Diya Wynn, responsible AI lead at Amazon Web Services. “We need to equip them to feel comfortable enough with the technology that they can engage with students in a meaningful way.” Wynn also highlighted the critical role of policy in influencing AI education and training outcomes, such as President Trump’s Executive Order on AI in K-12 education, as well as other areas, noting that existing policies, such as property-tax-based school funding, can pose significant barriers to opportunity.

Experts also said community-led and community-based programs are important vehicles for meeting Black learners and workers where they are. Denzel Wilson, grassroots program manager at SeedAI, a nonprofit that promotes responsible development of and increased access to AI, said it’s important to make sure people in communities with limited resources have access to training opportunities.

“Going into these communities and understanding their needs is the main thing,” he said. His organization does that through its Hack the Future initiative, which brings introductory AI training programs to cities across the country. “We’re trying to turn AI anxiety into intrigue and opportunity,” he explained. As another example of this type of initiative, Wilson pointed to the work of Tyrance Billingsley founder and executive director of Black Tech Street, which is working to establish Tulsa, Oklahoma, as a tech innovation hub and provide training to residents through a range of local partnerships.

The experts we interviewed also mentioned several other community-based organizations that provide training in AI and other tech-related skills and focus on expanding economic opportunity in communities that are underserved by systems and institutions, including AI4All, the Black AI Think Tank, Break Through Tech, NPower, Per Scholas, and the Hidden Genius Project.

AI education and training programs need to help participants gain a wide range of competencies, from technical (or "hard") skills that require advanced expertise to the durable (or "soft") skills that are essential to success in almost every field or occupation, such as communication, critical thinking, relationship-building, and collaboration capabilities—all of which are increasingly in demand in workplaces where the use of AI is on the rise. It's also essential to equip as many people as possible to not just use AI but also create things with AI. Paul argued that Black people and members of other communities that face barriers to economic success have largely been on the user and consumer side of previous tech revolutions, not on the creator side. But if training programs focused on how people can create solutions with AI, he said, "folks will start understanding that AI is not the enemy—exclusion and inequity are."

Youngblood highlighted the importance of training people in how to work with and alongside AI agents. "Our folks understand that in the future, your battle for a job may also include agents applying for the same position," he said. Citing Salesforce's recent decision to create Agentforce, an AI platform that allows users to create autonomous AI agents for specific business functions, and Hugging Face's introduction of Agent.AI, a framework for building AI agents, he said we're entering a new "agentic era," in which people will soon be "working with AI in synergy, symbiotically."

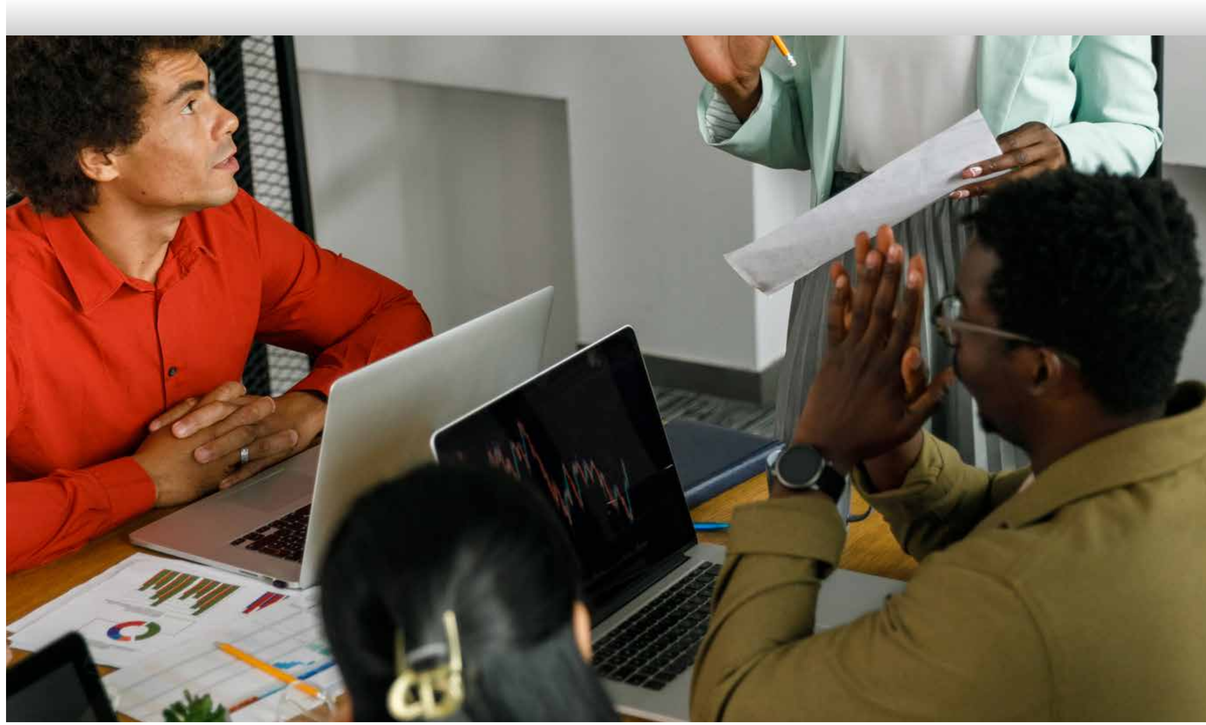
Finally, employers must play a critical role in training employees to use AI, but our survey results indicate that, although employer-provided AI

training is growing, workers are primarily learning about AI on their own. Twenty-eight percent of Black survey respondents said they use AI for their job on their own initiative, whereas 17% said they use it for work at their employer's direction. Meanwhile, 43% of Black workers reported that their employer offers training in AI fundamentals, tools, and/or systems, which is higher than the rate of 31% across the overall sample.

Survey respondents and the experts we interviewed identified several employers offering AI training courses and AI-related resources to employees at multiple skill levels, including Amazon Web Services, Coursera, Google, IBM, and OpenAI.

Recommendations:

- Make AI education and training universal at every stage of the learner/worker journey, starting with K-12 education. Include educators as part of universal training to ensure they can effectively prepare students to work with AI.
- Support national and community-led training efforts.
- Focus on a range of skills, from the fundamentals of AI to more advanced skills to prepare learners and workers to be both users and creators; and ensure that people are ready to use and work with AI agents.
- Expand training in the following areas: AI competency; responsible and effective design, use, and evaluation of AI; the impact AI will have on the future of work; and digital transformation and change management for workforce and education organizations.
- Support and create incentives for the development of employer-provided AI training for employees in all business units and at every level, including leaders.



Career Navigation and Social Capital

Our research indicates that Black learners and workers are already feeling the impact of AI on their careers. Roughly two-thirds (67%) of Black survey respondents said they feel that AI is currently having an impact on their jobs (vs. 57% of all respondents), and four out of five (83%) said they anticipate a future impact on their jobs. Moreover, 71% of Black respondents said they also feel the need to gain new skills due to the impact of AI on their work, compared to 53% of the total sample. And 45% of Black respondents said they have already changed or plan to change their careers because of the impact of AI, compared with 31% the overall sample. These findings may be linked in part to the fact that Black workers are overrepresented in jobs that are at risk of being eliminated because of AI and automation.

Black individuals are also leveraging AI tools for career mobility. Just over one-third (36%) of Black survey respondents said they've used AI tools to get a better job—a rate that's almost twice as high as that of the total sample. One in five (21%) Black respondents reported that using AI tools for this purpose led to significant career improvement. And 20% said they hadn't yet used AI tools to get a better job but plan to do so in the future. In both cases, the figures are significantly higher for Black respondents than for the overall survey sample. Many Black learners and workers are also using AI tools in the job application process. Respondents described using AI to help create resumes, prepare for interviews, and research industries. And one focus group participant said, "I've used AI to create a resume and cover letter using the skills that I have and asking AI to make those skills transferable for jobs that are not typically ones I would apply for."

AI's ability to expedite the process of finding and applying for open roles elevates the importance of building and leveraging social capital as a pathway to career success. As AI tools make it easier to apply for jobs, competition for open roles is increasing because the volume of applications is skyrocketing. And at the same time, employers are increasingly using AI tools to review the expanding volume of resumes and select qualified candidates. Amid all that automation, human connections are more important than ever. That can represent a challenge for Black people and members of other groups that are underrepresented in high-wage jobs in high-growth fields and have had limited opportunities to build professional social capital. These workers can turn to emerging AI platforms that are designed to support career navigation, but as JFF's research for a 2024 report revealed, there's a need for more (and better) tools designed to help jobseekers build and use social capital.

Moreover, Julia Freeland Fisher, director of education research at the Christensen Institute, warned that the rise in AI solutions offering career

navigation support for students could end up limiting their access to social capital. “I’m wary that AI is being built to address information gaps, but not network gaps. That’s a big miss,” she said. “Networks are critical to accessing opportunity. Given how segregated our networks are, bots that simply scale self-help, but not real connections, won’t address the whole of opportunity gaps.” Describing research she has conducted to explore AI’s impact on career navigation, she acknowledged that bots can “provide useful information, support, and even a sense of connection” but points out that “they can’t actually open doors to opportunities the way our human weak-tie networks do.”

Fisher recommends using AI tools in combination with comprehensive strategies for building social capital, such as networked mentorship arrangements in which students have access to a web of supporters that includes formal mentors and faculty and alumni of their schools, who are all committed to helping students advance their careers. In addition, she encourages postsecondary institutions to ensure that student advising and coaching services are designed to help students “both explore academics and careers, and deepen and diversify networks”—an approach that she said would be particularly beneficial “for learners and workers who may not have inherited networks in the industries they want to break into.”

Promising approaches identified in the scan of the market for workforce development AI tools that JFF conducted for the 2024 report include Climb Together, an organization that helps colleges build social capital strategies and recently developed a social capital AI bot that helps students practice relationship-building skills; and Basta, which runs a fellowship program for first-generation college grads and uses a custom-built career navigation tool, along with coaching, to help fellowship participants secure quality jobs.

Fisher also mentioned two other promising options: Protopia, an AI tool that students can use to identify and connect with alumni from their institutions who can respond to career-related questions, and Series, a startup founded by two Black students at Yale that uses AI to broker new networks among college students.

The 2022 JFF report *Building Professional Social Capital for Black Learners and Workers* argues that helping young people build professional social capital should be part of a holistic approach to supporting learners and workers that's woven into postsecondary curricula, programs offered by community-based organizations, and employer policies. It outlines five strategies for building social capital that are still critical in the age of AI: elevating current assets, building relationships, making connections and introductions, career onboarding, and focusing on the continuous learning journey.

Fisher noted that policy shifts would be needed to ensure that postsecondary institutions prioritize forging employer partnerships, which play a critical role in enabling students to build social capital. "If we can get to outcomes-based funding where you're actually on the hook for your graduates getting a job, then suddenly social capital development will click into place," she said.

Recommendations:

- Double down on supports and innovative models to help learners and workers develop professional social capital and build human networks to unlock opportunities.

Access to Technology and Talent Pathways

Many of our survey respondents, interviewees, and focus group participants observed that AI would have enormous potential for impact and innovation if all voices were included in shaping this technology for the future. They also expressed concern about the risks of excluding members of certain groups from AI development efforts and emphasized the need for broad access to both emerging technologies and talent pathways to AI leadership.

Access to communications systems and tech tools is key to ensuring that everyone will be able to play a role in the development of AI, and our survey presented a mixed outlook on that score. Ninety percent of Black survey respondents said they have broadband access, which is on par with the reported rate of access among all respondents. The survey indicates that the top deterrents to AI usage among Black workers and learners are lack of access to AI tools (cited by 26% of Black respondents) and the high cost of AI tools (31%). Nearly one in five (18%) Black respondents said they personally pay for these tools; that's about double the share of all respondents (10%) who said they pay for AI tools. And 69% of Black respondents reported accessing AI tools via a personal smartphone or tablet, which is a higher rate than the overall sample. And while just 16% of all respondents said that they have access to paid AI tools provided by their employers or schools, 28% of Black respondents reported having such access. While we opened this brief by saying that Black Americans are highly engaged with AI, these figures show that a significant proportion of Black respondents (over half) are not accessing paid AI tools and thus are not yet reaping the benefits of the advanced functionality these versions offer.

While lack of access to broadband internet service may be a hurdle to tech usage in many communities, experts we interviewed say there's a need to push further and take steps to ensure that people in such areas are not just connected but also equipped to make full use of AI and other emerging technologies. "Access to broadband should be like running water," says Franklin-Davis. "But also, we've moved on from that."

Another related theme that emerged in our research is the need to ensure that AI is shaped by and responsive to the full breadth of people who use it, so that it reflects everyone's backgrounds and experiences. Current approaches to AI development don't appear to be on track to do that, said Youngblood, who described his perspective vividly: "It feels like AI companies keep tossing out new products and updates like candy over the castle wall and moat. And as Black people, we're on the other side, expected to shout our ideas to improve their products back across the moat. But we're not on the other side *with* them, at the table where the real decisions get made."

Others agreed that a different approach is essential. “We need a variety of people that are designing and training the tech,” said a focus group member. “We need more people of color in positions to build the tools and use cases.”

Shead emphasized the need for more research and development (R&D) dollars to better tailor educational tools and programs to the needs of students and families living in communities with limited resources. “There needs to be more investment in asking and working with population design,” she said. Offering an example of an effective approach, she said the Gates Foundation invested in Stemuli’s R&D on AI and immersive gaming technology to improve outcomes in math for K-12 students who are Black, Latine, and/or members of families experiencing poverty.

Addressing these challenges requires an intentional focus on building sustainable talent pipelines. Wilson said SeedAI is working to create talent pathways in AI at a group of community colleges as part of the National Applied AI Consortium. The program supports colleges in developing ethical and responsible technician-level AI courses and certificate and degree programs, and in providing professional development for faculty members to teach AI. “It’s something that is very near and dear to me because I come out of one of these programs,” he said. He added that

there's growing excitement among community colleges interested in participating in this type of program, and he stressed the need to invest in community colleges and other training providers so they can take advantage of these opportunities. He also advocates for giving colleges access to the computational resources required for AI systems to perform tasks such as storing, processing, and transferring data at scale.

Wilson also called on employers to get on board with recruiting talent coming out of these programs and creating apprenticeships and other programs so participants can "come right out of college into jobs, where they are largely going to have to work alongside AI."

An important component of creating pathways is designing programs with the entire pipeline in mind. "We need to address transition points," said Abiola. "Many programs get you to a starting point, but existing talent is not moving up the ladder in the tech world and in entrepreneurship." One example of an effort addressing this issue is Black in AI, which supports Black researchers and professionals across the AI ecosystem through mentorship, research collaboration, and advocacy—helping bridge critical gaps from education to leadership.

In addition, Wynn said there must be more coordination among and long-term investment in AI-related education and workforce development programs. She said many programs only target discrete points along the learner/worker journey rather than a connected pathway that leads to sustainable employment. "All are attempts to reach underserved communities to get them excited about the opportunities and even provide some skills," she said, "but there isn't something through the continuum, where the result would be people in jobs, not just skills and knowledge."

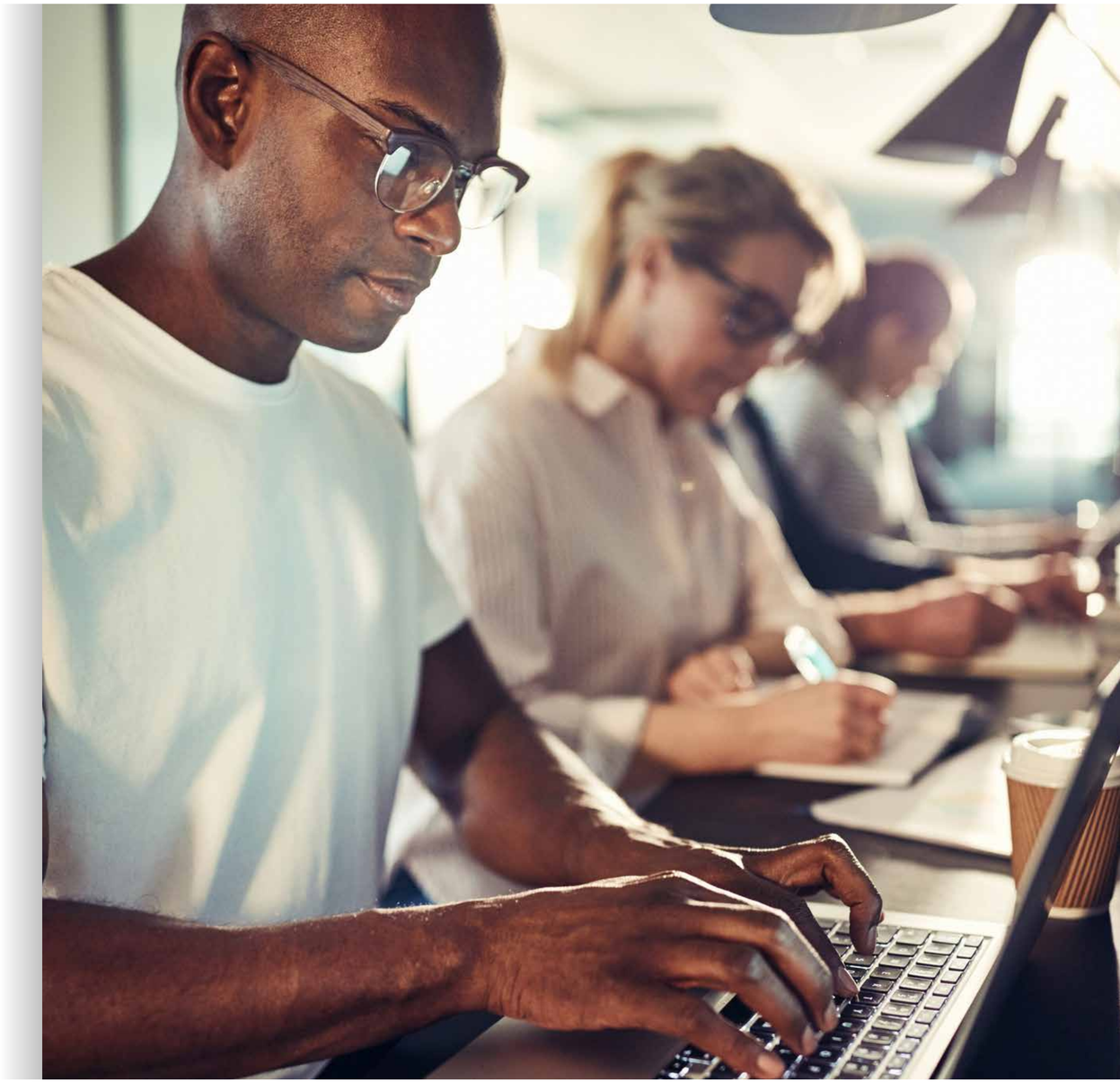
Wynn also pointed to the role of employers in ensuring pathways are embedded in a supportive culture. "Employers need to create a culture that is conducive to staying and growing," she said. "Part of the onus is on institutions and employers to create inclusive environments and career pathways that provide opportunities for equitable advancement."

Ultimately, building the talent pipeline and ensuring equitable access to AI technologies are interlinked. Franklin-Davis said it's important to continuously train workers so they can keep up with the rapidly changing landscape of AI and to build clear, actionable pathways that allow people to thrive in their communities. "So many students are on pathways to nowhere," she said. "We need to make sure our communities understand what pathways go somewhere." This includes helping people understand what skills they will need in order to get to the next step and how they can use AI to understand the job opportunities aligned with their skills and

credentials in their communities. “Those are the opportunities I think Black learners and workers will really care about,” she said.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that individuals and communities have the IT infrastructure and equipment necessary to access and make full use of AI platforms, including:
  - › Grid connectivity, broadband service, PCs and other devices, generative AI solutions, and cloud storage
  - › Free or reduced-cost access to advanced AI models for workers, learners, families, and organizations facing barriers to access
  - › On-device, low-bandwidth, and open-source AI models
- Design and deliver initiatives that broadly expand access to education and training and create opportunities for everyone to build AI skills and advance in the AI workforce.
- Enlist workers and learners from all demographic groups to co-create and develop AI technology, especially for education and workforce development.



Risks and Opportunities

In addition to the high levels of optimism about and engagement with AI among Black learners and workers, our research also revealed a prevailing sense of fear, distrust, and anxiety around the potential impacts of AI on the Black community, especially related to risks of job loss, perpetuation of biases, and exploitation of data, content, and culture.

Survey respondents and focus group participants described apocalyptic fears influenced by depictions of AI in popular culture, such as the movies Terminator and I, Robot. "It's scary because it could replace humans entirely," said one focus group participant. Some people also expressed concern that AI, with its powerful capabilities, might leave humans with nothing meaningful to contribute. "It creates the concern that humans won't have a role in the future, when AI can do something at a higher level of mastery than a human ever could," said another focus group participant. With the rise of employers like Spotify and Duolingo touting an "AI-first" mindset in the workplace, these concerns will continue to grow without more human-centered strategies from employers.

There is also mistrust toward AI's potential for bias. Black learners and workers expressed skepticism that AI systems will accurately or fairly represent their needs, given that AI models are often trained on datasets that don't reflect their culture or identity. Youngblood said many Black people refrain from using AI because they're worried about a lack of data privacy. Many people feel, "We need to be diligent with what we put out there because our culture is rich, and these models are not trained on us," he said. "In AI, we are not the default."

Other experts flagged the negative consequences of biased and incomplete data on hiring practices. Paul said that using biased information in AI solutions will lead to biased outcomes. "If your goal is to increase diversity within your hiring practices, you cannot train AI to do what you've always done because you'll get the result you've always gotten," he said. He added that his company, OptimaNova AI, works with employers to examine existing talent management practices, set goals for the future, and identify what he calls "gap data"—the missing data that helps employers understand how to meet their workforce goals.

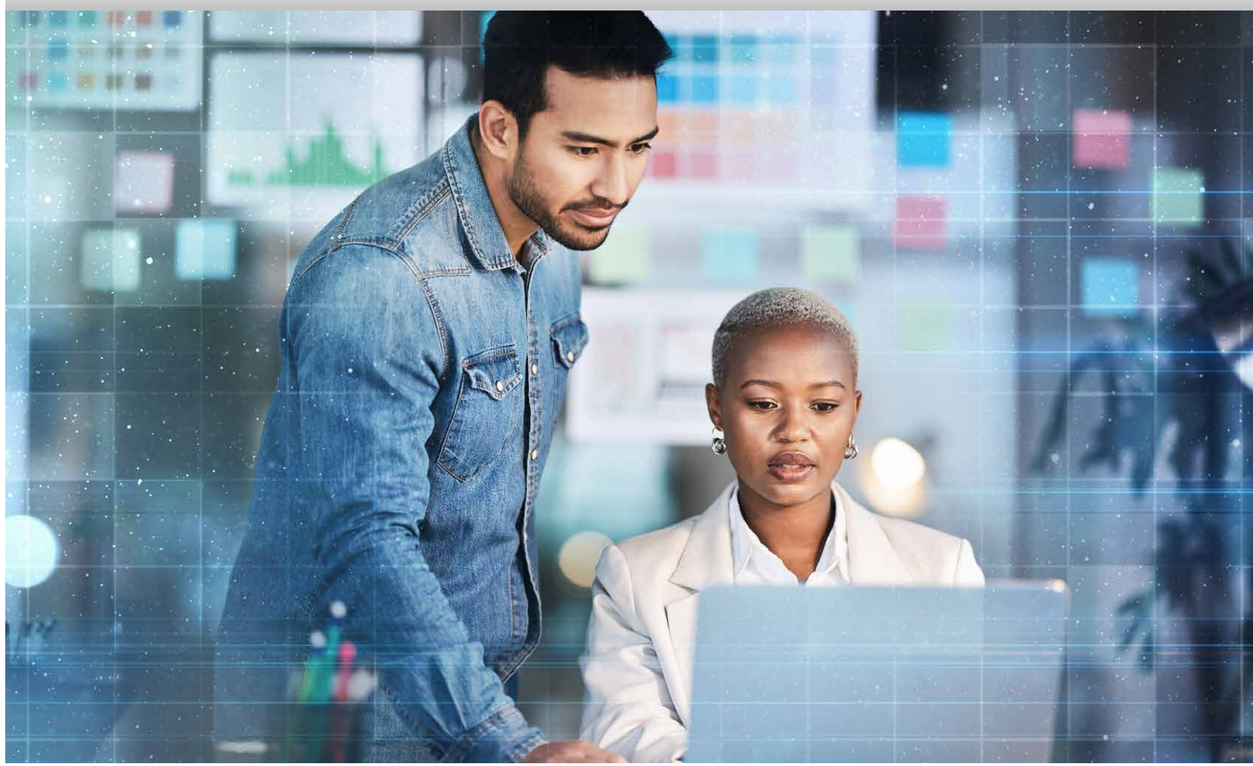
A related theme that emerged consistently is a concern about data ownership. As Wilson said, if communities don't control their own data, they risk being exploited or left out of the benefits that AI and other emerging technologies can bring. He specifically advocates for "localized data centers" that could provide communities with both the infrastructure and skills needed to manage and protect their data, ensuring that members of the community can use the data for their own benefit without fear of exploitation. Without data ownership, he warned, Black people risk having their intellectual property and personal stories being "scraped" off the

internet and used or appropriated without recognition or compensation.

At the same time, Wilson and others emphasized the potential for AI to serve as a tool for amplifying Black culture and promoting innovation. He noted that with strong data, there are expanded possibilities for content creation, storytelling, and artistic expression. Nicholson added that people living in communities with limited access to resources may benefit from AI in ways that aren't immediately obvious. "People with a high level of trust in AI who assume the tools were designed to work for them may not know how to navigate if the tools don't work or tell the truth," he said. "But those whose experiences have not been centered in the tools' design may be more critical in their analysis of how the tools work, and more inclined and motivated to see what else they can do to benefit the users."

These ideas align with the desire expressed by many focus group participants to see their culture represented and valued by new technologies. As Youngblood said, "We demand our history to be accurately preserved. Black culture is gold and in that we have something no one's gonna take away."

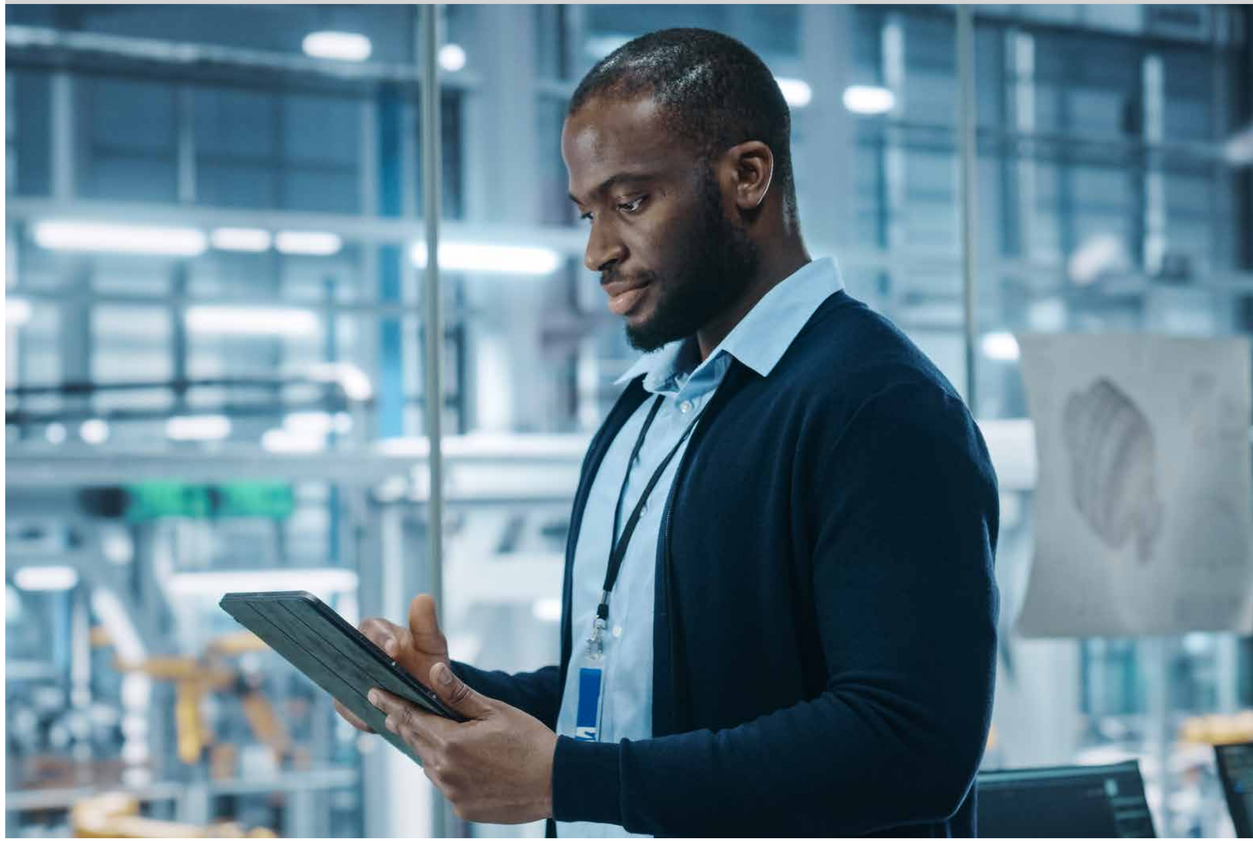
Part of building trust and promoting inclusion involves a focus on fairness and transparency. Several experts emphasized the importance of proper governance and accountability around AI use. Paul advocates for stronger policies around AI fairness, especially in areas like hiring, finance, and law enforcement, where AI biases can have serious consequences. He highlighted the need for bias audits in these systems to ensure that they aren't perpetuating existing inequities. He also cited two examples of existing methodologies for conducting bias audits: the AI Fairness 360 toolkit from IBM and Google's PAIR fairness metrics. "Both provide



structured, transparent approaches to evaluate and mitigate bias in AI systems," Paul said. In addition, he called for more transparency and accountability. "If companies use AI in hiring," he said, "they have to not only disclose that, but they have to prove that it's fair."

Recommendations:

- Robustly fund efforts to evaluate AI training datasets for representation and bias, and develop communities of practice within workforce and education ecosystems to better understand where underlying datasets may show bias.
- Expand and fund efforts to create, collect, and fund multimodal AI training data representing the experiences of populations facing barriers to advancement.
- Explore new models for the development and ownership of AI training data, and look for new ways to compensate developers of that data, especially for the labor of training AI tools and in cases where data is based on unique knowledge, skills, abilities, or creative work.
- Support workforce and education professionals' participation in AI development through how-to resources and funding.
- Transparently disclose AI use and workforce impacts in workplace, workforce development, and education settings, and share any audit and impact assessment results.
- Involve workers in workforce planning and strategy, particularly when there are job and task impacts from AI use.



An Opportunity to Build on the Momentum

The AI revolution presents leaders throughout the education, workforce development, tech sectors with both a profound opportunity to drive upward economic mobility and a critical responsibility to ensure that AI is developed and managed in a way that benefits us all. For the Black community in this country—a population that is already engaging with AI at high rates, and doing so with optimism, creativity, and vision—there's a great deal of momentum to build on. Realizing AI's promise as a driver of economic mobility will require coordinated action, bold investment, and a deep commitment to ensuring that everyone benefits.

The experts we spoke to sum up the opportunity well. "With all of the challenges and risks, there is also no shortage of opportunities," said Nicholson, noting that several high-profile tech companies have recently announced pivots to AI while making cutbacks in other operations. "It's fascinating—what that tells me is none of these people really know what to do with any of this and are not sure what's next."

Freeland Fisher stressed the need for speed and agility. "The tech is advancing at a rate so much faster than thoughtful conversations about use cases, policy implications, etc.," she said. "If racial equity is not positioned with the same agility that the tech conversation is, it will fall behind."

And Franklin-Davis said there are moments of opportunity even in places that may not seem obvious. "In areas where it may seem like a technology desert or deficit, it's a real opportunity for organizations like JFF and others to invest in what the future could look like, because there aren't the initial barriers that we thought were holding us back," she said. "It's an opportunity right now to move faster."

Now is the time to act—with speed, with agility, and with intentionality. We must work across sectors to close gaps, invest in talent, amplify innovation, and build the infrastructure and conditions that ensure AI benefits everyone.

JFF plans to continue exploring the impact AI will have on specific populations, examining both the opportunities it represents and the concerns it raises, and designing tailored solutions that take advantage of the opportunities and address the concerns. This brief is the first in a series; future publications will focus on other populations facing unique opportunities and challenges with AI.

Our Opportunity

Recommended Action Steps by Audience

While we earlier recommended broad action steps that can help achieve the goals we've discussed, we think it's also important to offer more detailed recommendations for specific groups of stakeholders who are in positions to effect change—leaders of education and training programs, employers, investors and philanthropists, and policymakers. We look forward to discussing these recommendations and testing them in practical implementations in the field.

For Education and Training Leaders

- Embed AI education throughout the learning life cycle, beginning with K-12 coursework and extending through higher ed programming, workforce training programs, and lifelong learning experiences. Provide educators with AI training for both student-facing and practitioner-facing tools so they're equipped to prepare the next generation for the future of work.
- Champion accessible national and community-led training models, particularly those offered by community-based organizations or are otherwise deeply embedded in the local context.
- Prepare learners to be both AI users and creators, with curricula covering AI fundamentals, advanced skills, and human-AI collaboration—including working with AI agents.
- Promote responsible AI use and data literacy, including how to design, evaluate, and audit AI systems and datasets.
- Advocate for learners' access to tools, broadband service, and other AI-enabling elements of the IT infrastructure.
- Create opportunities for educators and students to co-create AI tools, particularly for education and workforce use cases that reflect their lived experiences.

For Employers

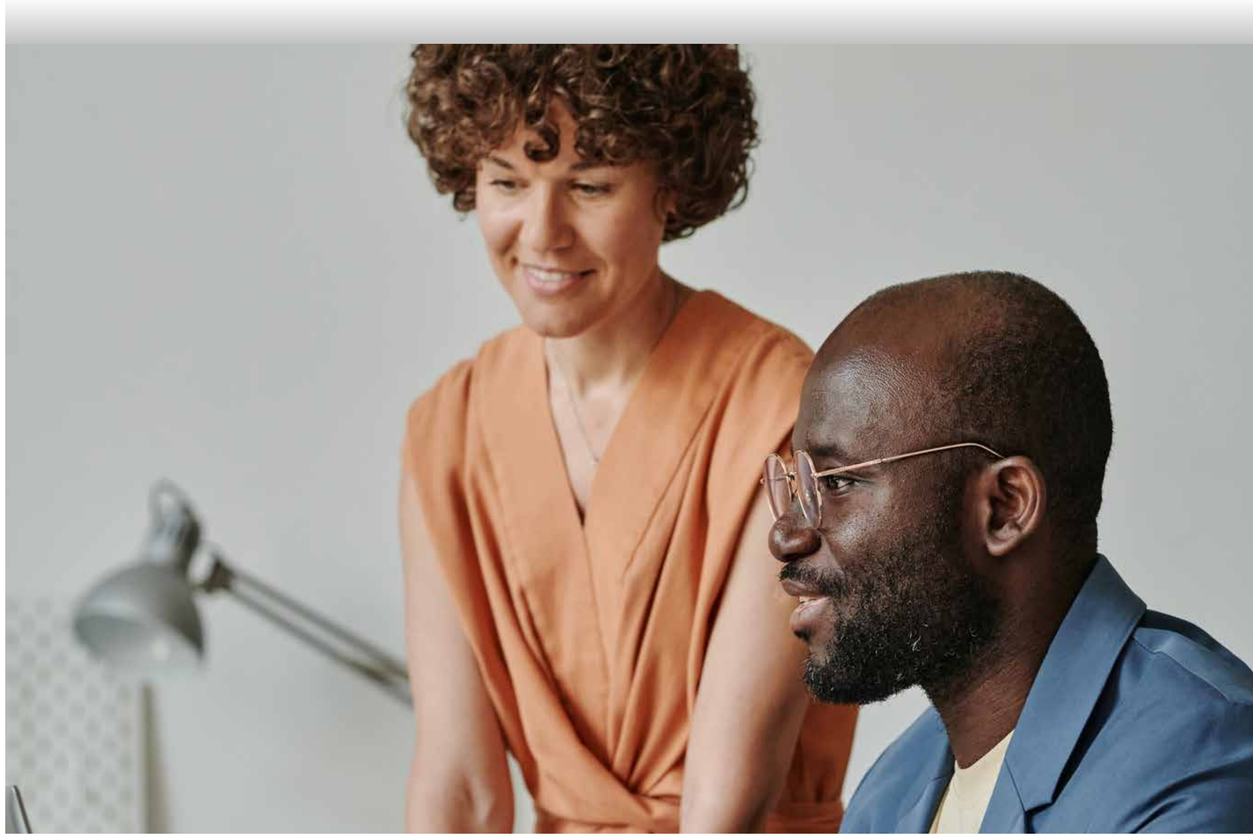
- Expand AI training programs to ensure that workers in all roles—not just technical staffers—understand how to use AI effectively and responsibly. Include practical uses cases tailored to specific roles.
- Provide organization-wide access to AI tools and related resources, including paid subscriptions to advanced versions of the tools, workplace training, and time for experimentation.
- Identify roles most likely to be affected or augmented by AI, and target learning and development efforts to support internal upskilling, reskilling, and career mobility.
- Offer all employees career navigation resources and services and opportunities to build professional social capital, to help workers unlock opportunities in AI-related fields.
- Be transparent about the way your organization uses AI, especially applications that support hiring, promotion, and training decisions. Share the results of audits of AI usage.
- Enlist employees in co-developing AI solutions, especially those designed to support workforce development or frontline work.

For Investors and Funders

- Direct capital toward entrepreneurs and innovators who are members of populations that are underrepresented in the startup and tech sectors, especially those building AI-related products or services designed to expand opportunities for upward economic mobility at the community level.
- Support incubators and accelerators that focus on expanding opportunities in the startup sector, offer long-term capacity-building supports, and provide real pathways to scale and sustainability.
- Invest in efforts to build out IT infrastructure and expand access to AI tools and other emerging technologies, including programs that make devices, broadband service, cloud computing platforms, and advanced AI models more widely available at the community level.
- Fund community-centered initiatives that promote the development of AI innovation economies beyond Silicon Valley and other established tech hubs, and support fair compensation models for individuals whose knowledge or creativity contributes to training data.

For Policymakers

- Advance policies that help improve AI governance in ways that mitigate bias in AI solutions and promote the development of systems that reflect everyone's experiences.
- Fund initiatives that expand the digital infrastructure to promote widespread access to broadband internet service and low-bandwidth. AI tools, and make AI resources publicly available in schools and libraries and enable procurement or development of AI-enabled career navigation tools and platforms.
- Create a technology and data innovation fund that states and regional authorities could tap to develop or procure AI-enabled career navigation tools and platforms.
- Craft policies that offer incentives for the creation of programs that promote workforce participation in AI creation, through grants, apprenticeships, and public-private partnerships.
- Support the responsible collection and governance of training data through policies that establish frameworks for ethical data ownership, disclosure, and transparency.
- Require and fund impact assessments and audits of AI systems used in education and employment contexts, with opportunities for community input on outcomes and risks.
- Establish an AI center of excellence to conduct research that informs future federal policies and investments.



Appendix

Methodology

The data, insights, and recommendations we share in this brief are based on a nationwide survey, conversations with focus groups, and interviews with AI experts. Here are details about each:

Survey: In partnership with AudienceNet, JFF surveyed 2,754 U.S. respondents in November and December 2024 to explore how workers and learners perceive, use, and experience the impacts of AI. The survey especially sought out participation from members of populations facing barriers to advancement—which JFF identifies as people without a four-year college degree, people of color and women of any racial background whose highest level of education is a four-year degree, and people with records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration—to ensure robust insights from people in these populations. Final data was weighted back to statistically reflect the U.S. population, with respondents ranging in age from 16 to 65 and over, in accordance with the latest U.S. Census data for comparison purposes. The sample included 529 respondents who identified as Black or African American. This brief highlights toppling findings specific to the Black respondents. Full survey findings for Black respondents are available here, and full survey findings for the total sample are available here.

Focus groups: In partnership with Gallup, JFF conducted two virtual focus groups with 10 to 12 participants each—one made up of full-time students and one made up of full-time workers—to gain a better understanding of how AI tools are being used, how employers might use AI tools to assess workers' skills and capabilities, and consumer perceptions of AI. All of the focus group participants self-identified as Black or African American. The learner focus group consisted of people ages 18–35 with education levels ranging from a high school diploma to a two-year degree. They were enrolled full-time and had some awareness of AI. The worker focus group consisted of people ages 18 to 65 with education levels ranging from a high school diploma to a four-year degree. They were employed full-time, held entry- to mid-level positions, and had some awareness of AI. Participants in both groups represented a range of U.S. regions, industries, areas of study, gender identities, and household income levels.

Expert interviews: JFF engaged a range of AI experts and other leaders from across the workforce, education, and technology ecosystems to gain their insights about the potential impact of AI on the future of work and on the lives and careers of Black learners and workers in particular. This group included advisors to the JFFLabs Center for AI and the Future of Work and JFF's Center for Population Strategies. The interviews, which included both one-on-one and group conversations, took place from January to April 2025.

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