



When AI inadvertently shapes who succeeds

RESEARCH BRIEF

Why it matters

AI reshapes how work is organized, evaluated, rewarded, creating multiple points where inequality emerges and compounds. Small disparities introduced during AI design can later shape evaluation norms, productivity expectations, and team dynamics, causing what the researchers call “inequality cascades.” AI-driven task restructuring can widen wage and mobility gaps as some workers benefit disproportionately from augmentation while others face deskilling or displacement. As organizations deploy AI across functions and workflows, inequality risks become structural rather than isolated. Leaders **need to evaluate** not just how AI performs but its social and relational consequences within the workplace.

How we know

The authors conducted an integrative **review of 335 peer-reviewed articles**, using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) procedures across management, economics, sociology, info systems, and public policy. They identified **4** existing perspectives in the literature: *normative*, *cognitive*, *structural*, and *relational*, and showed how they interact across the AI lifecycle to produce inequalities.

What researchers found

- ▶ Encoded inequality arises when AI systems inherit biased data or reflect design choices that prioritize efficiency over fairness.
- ▶ Evaluative inequality occurs when workers’ perceptions of AI (trust, judgments, and interpretation) shape performance outcomes, credibility, and access to opportunity.
- ▶ Wage inequality emerges as AI redistributes tasks and productivity gains, often benefiting higher-skill or AI-literate workers more.
- ▶ Relational inequality occurs when AI alters authority, autonomy, expertise, and coordination.

These create *cumulative inequality cascades*, and technical solutions alone cannot address them.

What this means

- ▶ **For executives:** Treat AI adoption as an organizational transformation, not a technical upgrade; assess inequality risks across the full AI lifecycle and align AI strategy.
- ▶ **For HR, learning, and governance leaders:** Monitor how AI changes skill demands, evaluation criteria, and internal mobility; invest in training programs to support human-AI collaboration and equitable skill development. Combine technical bias checks with contextual and cross-functional insight, and continuously monitor how AI affects real workflows.
- ▶ **For managers and team leads:** Help teams navigate automation bias, and ensuring that workers retain meaningful autonomy.

Now what?

Assess AI systems for encoded, wage, and relational inequalities, and identify where early disparities may escalate. **Examine** AI across the design–implementation–use lifecycle to understand how assumptions and workflows create persistent disparities. **Strengthen** AI literacy so employees can interpret outputs, avoid automation bias, and support fair outcomes. **Monitor** how AI reshapes tasks, decision-making, and autonomy, and adjust practices to prevent inequality. **Measure** employee well-being as AI and internal entrepreneurial behaviors impact mental health.

LINK TO THE STUDY

