

WHITE PAPER

AI & The Two-Tier Workforce

How AI adoption is reshaping recruitment and progression - and what People leaders must do now

Jenny Garrett OBE | Founder & CEO, Jenny Garrett Global | March 2026

Informed by a senior People leaders roundtable convened in London, March 2026. Incorporating the EQUITAS™ Framework for Equitable AI. Supporting evidence drawn from MIT AI Strategy & Leadership Programme, the ILO, CIPD, ICO, and current UK employment law research.

Executive Summary

The core argument

AI is not creating a two-tier workforce. It is revealing one that already exists - and accelerating the distance between the tiers. The decisions being made in organisations right now will determine whether that divide becomes permanent. People leaders are uniquely positioned to influence those decisions. Most are not yet in the room where they are made.

This paper draws on a senior people leaders roundtable convened in London in March 2026, set against current evidence from the ILO, PwC, CIPD, and UK employment law. It maps six fault lines along which the two-tier workforce is forming, frames them against the PEST and SWOT context facing People leaders today, and offers the EQUITAS™ Framework as a practical governance lens.

The six fault lines

1	The Knowledge Gap	42% of employees expect significant AI-driven role change within a year, yet only 35% of organisations have a structured AI upskilling programme. The gap tracks directly with seniority, income, and access. [3]
2	The Access Gap	Frontline and operational workers receive less than 1% of corporate technology budgets. Shadow AI is filling the gap that formal strategy has left open. [10, 12]
3	The Demographics Gap	29% of female-dominated roles are exposed to generative AI vs 16% of male-dominated ones. Automation risk in recruitment and progression is not gender-neutral - and the bias compounds at every career stage. [13]
4	The Leadership Gap	Only 21% of HR functions are closely involved in AI strategy decisions. People leaders are brought in to manage the consequences of choices they were not part of making. [23]
5	The Dependency Risk	Skill atrophy - not job displacement - is now the workforce's primary AI concern. Entry-level vacancies have fallen 32% since ChatGPT launched. The missing rung is becoming structural. [5, 20]

6 The Credibility Gap

The pressure to perform AI competence is producing reactive decisions nobody can defend. Leaders who cannot interrogate AI tools cannot govern them equitably. [18]

Five actions for this quarter

- Audit your AI tools for equitable impact - before the regulator does
- Claim your seat in AI governance - with evidence, not just presence
- Design an AI access strategy - not just an AI training strategy
- Build structured reskilling pathways - especially for the roles most at risk
- Protect the entry-level pipeline - it is your future leadership bench

The EQUITAS™ Framework

Seven commitments for equitable AI governance - Examine, Question, Unite, Invest, Track, Act, Start - drawn from practitioner research across four continents. Each maps directly onto a fault line identified in this paper. Presented in full in Section 5.

Foreword

On 18 March 2026, we at Jenny Garrett Global brought together a group of senior people leaders - CPOs, HRDs, Heads of EDI and AI - from organisations spanning financial services, energy, telecoms, and the NHS. The question we put to the room was one that most leadership teams are quietly avoiding: is AI adoption creating a two-tier workforce - and what is our responsibility to do about it?

What struck us was not the novelty of the concerns raised. It was the familiarity. The fault lines we discussed - who gets access to tools, whose roles are most exposed to automation, who is absent from AI governance conversations - are the same fault lines that have run through organisations for decades. AI is not creating new inequalities. It is accelerating the ones we already have.

This white paper captures what we heard in that room, set against the most current evidence base available. It connects our roundtable findings to a framework we have developed through practitioner interviews on four continents - the EQUITAS™ Framework for Equitable AI, co-authored with Leah-Sunshine Garrett. That framework, published in full in our forthcoming book *AI for Equity* (Emerald, September 2026), offers a practical governance lens that any People leader can apply in their organisation today. We recognise we are not a neutral party in this conversation. That is precisely why we have anchored this paper in primary external evidence rather than proprietary research - so that the argument stands on its own.

Jenny Garrett OBE

Founder & CEO, Jenny Garrett Global | AI for Equity podcast | MIT AI Strategy & Leadership

Roundtable Contributors

This paper is informed by the candid, confidential contributions of senior people leaders who gave their time and insight on 18 March 2026. We are grateful to each of them. Sector

attributions are used in place of individual names to preserve the confidentiality of the discussion.

Sector / Organisation	Role / Function
Financial Services (Insurance)	People Director
Regulatory Body (Communications)	Head of EDI
NHS Trust	Senior People Leader
Energy & Infrastructure	Head of AI / Head of D&I & Wellbeing
Global Media & Data Analytics	Global Head of Talent & People Development
Executive Search	Senior Consultant
Private Equity-backed Business	Chief People Officer
Financial Services	People Leader
Financial Technology	Senior People Leader

Roundtable hosted by Equans UK & Ireland. Led by Jenny Garrett OBE, Jenny Garrett Global.

1. The Context: Why This Conversation, Why Now

We are operating in a moment of compounding pressures. The technology is moving faster than the governance frameworks. The regulatory environment is shifting beneath organisations' feet. The political climate around equity and inclusion is more contested than at any point in a decade. And the workforce consequences of AI adoption are being felt right now, in real organisations, by real people - while strategy documents are still being drafted.

Senior people leaders who want to lead effectively through this moment need a clear picture of the environment they are operating in. The analysis below draws on a PEST framework to map the forces shaping the AI and workforce equity landscape in the UK in March 2026.

P Political

- No UK AI legislation yet - employers carry the full legal liability under Equality Act 2010 and UK GDPR
- Employment Rights Act 2025 introduces mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting (phased 2026-2027)
- EU AI Act fully activates August 2026 - directly relevant for UK orgs with EU operations
- UK AI Regulation Bill re-introduced to Lords (March 2025) - direction of travel is towards increased oversight

E Economic

- 81% of UK CEOs say AI investment is their top priority for 2026 - budgets are moving fast
- Cost pressures are the rationale for both AI adoption and DEI budget cuts - a dangerous convergence
- Only 25% of UK CEOs believe they can attract high-quality AI talent
- Organisations connecting 75%+ of frontline workforce digitally see 20%+ bottom-line growth

• US DEI rollback under Trump is creating political contagion risk for UK-based People leaders in US-parented organisations • The UK government has cut apprenticeship levy funding for Level 7 leadership and management qualifications - removing the primary funding mechanism many organisations relied on to build the mid-level capability that AI is now eliminating	• The gender tech talent drain costs the UK economy £2-3.5bn annually - a measurable cost of inaction
S Social • Three in five UK employees say they would leave if their employer rolled back DEI (APM, 2025) • 57% of workers believe skill atrophy - not job loss - will be AI's biggest workforce impact in 2026 • UK gender pay gap narrowed to 6.9% in early 2025, but progress stalled by July - a warning signal • Far-right political movements are using anti-equity rhetoric as a cultural wedge - organisations are caught in the crossfire • Entry-level job vacancies down 32% since November 2022 - a generational workforce crisis forming quietly	T Technological • Agentic AI - AI that acts autonomously without prompting - is moving from pilot to embedded in 2026 • 52% of talent leaders plan to add AI agents to their teams; HR records are being created for AI 'employees' • ICO automated decision-making guidance expected Spring 2026 - likely to tighten explainability requirements • Credibility performance - AI adoption driven by appearance rather than strategy - producing poor governance decisions that compound inequity • Shadow AI is already widespread: 80% of UK employees have used AI at work but 81% do not always disclose it to managers or colleagues (Cornerstone OnDemand, November 2025) • AI hiring tools are screening on graduation date, employment gaps and CV language - proxy discrimination at scale

These forces do not operate in isolation. The DEI budget pressure and the AI investment surge are happening simultaneously - in many organisations, they are decisions made in adjacent rooms. The governance vacuum and the legal liability are not abstract risks: they are your organisation's current legal exposure. The social expectation that employers will act with integrity is meeting a technological environment that, without deliberate design, will undermine it.

This is the context in which the roundtable took place. And it is the context in which the decisions your organisation makes in the next six months will either protect or compound the two-tier workforce that is already forming.

2. What Is Actually Happening

AI is not creating a two-tier workforce. It is revealing one that already exists - and accelerating the distance between the tiers.

The pattern is consistent across sectors: those with access to tools, training, and strategic visibility are pulling further ahead. Those without - frontline workers, older employees, women in administrative roles, disabled colleagues, junior staff, and those with lower digital fluency - are being left to adapt alone, or not at all.

| *"We talk about AI democratising access. But who's actually getting the licences?"*

This is not inevitable. It is a design choice. And people leaders are uniquely positioned to influence that design - if they are in the room when the decisions are made.

The risk right now is not that organisations are ignoring AI. It is that many are performing it - procuring tools, publishing strategies, attending conferences - without doing the harder work of asking who benefits, who is exposed, and who is being left to adapt alone. AI theatre is not a neutral failure. It actively crowds out the deliberate, equity-focused approach that would make a difference.

3. Six Fault Lines: What the Evidence Shows

The roundtable surfaced six recurring tensions. Each is supported by current evidence. Together, they describe how the two-tier workforce is forming - and where intervention is most urgent.

FROM THE ROOM

"2026 technology on a 1996 business model. We're layering AI onto archaic processes without redesigning the end-to-end user journey."

"99% of the workforce is in a GenAI frenzy focused only on language models. A small fraction understand deeper capability. That gap is where the value gets lost."

"It's not about being behind the curve. Even the biggest players aren't sure what's next. The advantage isn't speed - it's being deliberate."

"AI is being dropped on top of the day job. We're not stopping to ask how work could be fundamentally better."

"There is no curve to be behind. That framing itself is part of the problem."

FAULT LINE 1 | The Knowledge Gap

Most people think they understand AI. Almost nobody does.

What we heard

The roundtable surfaced a distinction that rarely makes it into strategy documents: the difference between AI literacy and AI fluency. Most employees conflate AI with large language models. The chat interface is the whole picture. Meanwhile, the full spectrum of AI capability - from predictive analytics to computer vision to autonomous agents - remains invisible to the people whose roles it will reshape.

| *"99% of the workforce thinks AI means ChatGPT. The remaining 1% are making infrastructure decisions that will affect everyone else."*

What the data shows

42% of employees expect their role to change significantly due to AI within the next year. Yet only 17% use AI frequently today, and 34% feel unprepared. Most telling: 42% say their employer expects them to learn AI on their own. Organisations with structured, workforce-

wide AI upskilling are nearly twice as likely to report significant ROI. Yet only 35% have such a programme in place.

One participant introduced a framing that has stayed with us: the talent pipeline is no longer shaped like a pyramid. It is becoming a barrel. Decades of under-investment in mid-level development, combined with the automation of entry-level roles and the reluctance to hire juniors, is creating a workforce that is broad in the middle and hollow at both ends. There are no apprentices learning the craft. There are no senior leaders who came up through the new kind of work. There is just the middle, holding everything together.

A second observation was equally sharp: AI is being deployed as a conversation, not a change. Tools are handed to people on top of their existing workloads. Nobody is asking the more fundamental question - how could this work be redesigned? That distinction, between AI as addition and AI as transformation, is where most organisations are currently stuck.

What is at stake

The knowledge gap is not evenly distributed. It tracks directly with seniority, income, and access. UK-specific research from Cornerstone OnDemand (2,000 UK employees, October 2025) is stark: only 16% of employees earning £15,000 or less receive formal AI training often or always, compared to 47% of those earning over £55,000 - a near-threefold gap. 51% of UK employees have never or rarely received any AI training or tools from their employer at all. The people closest to the work being transformed are the least equipped to shape how that transformation unfolds.

35%

of organisations have a structured, workforce-wide AI upskilling programme. For the remaining 65%, the workforce is expected to adapt without support.

FAULT LINE 2 | The Access Gap

Some people get tools and training. Others get expectations.

What we heard

AI rollouts in most organisations have followed a familiar pattern: pilot with senior knowledge workers, expand to corporate functions, defer frontline and operational roles until the technology matures. The result is a widening gap between those who are learning to work with AI and those who are simply working harder without it.

What the data shows

Global research from Boston Consulting Group (2024) shows that eighty percent of the global workforce are deskless workers. They receive less than 1% of corporate technology budgets. Only 21% of HR functions are closely involved in AI strategy decisions. Meanwhile, 80% of UK employees have used AI to support their work - but 81% do not always tell their manager or colleagues they are doing so (Cornerstone OnDemand, November 2025). Only 33% say they are often or always encouraged to use AI at work. 51% have never or rarely received any training or official tools to support AI use. Shadow AI is filling the gap that formal strategy has left open.

What is at stake

Global data indicates that frontline workers with AI access report a 41% burnout rate, compared to 54% for those without. Organisations that digitally connect 75% or more of their frontline workforce see 20% or greater bottom-line growth. The business case is clear. The investment pattern is not.

FAULT LINE 3 | The Demographics Gap

AI does not affect everyone equally. It was not designed to.

What we heard

"We're automating the roles where women are concentrated. We're not reskilling them for the roles where women are absent."

The answer, across sectors, is consistent: women in administrative and clerical roles. Older workers in mid-career transitions. Neurodivergent employees and colleagues with learning disabilities who currently hold the repetitive, structured roles most exposed to automation - roles that provided precisely the kind of predictable, contained work that enabled them to contribute and progress. These are not edge cases - they are the majority of the workforce in many functions, and they are disproportionately absent from AI governance conversations.

One participant named this as the second order impact: not the immediate disruption of AI adoption, but what happens after the first wave. Roles disappear. People are not redeployed. The question of who fills the resulting vacuum - and who is left without a pathway - is not being asked at the same speed as the automation decisions are being made.

Recruitment: where the bias enters

Under UK law, liability does not sit with the software provider. It sits with the employer that decides to deploy the system. Once AI processes candidate data, ranks applications, or influences rejection decisions, UK GDPR, the Data Protection Act 2018, and the Equality Act 2010 are engaged. AI hiring tools have been flagged for screening out experienced candidates via graduation dates, employment gaps, and CV language that correlates with age - a direct Equality Act risk. Ageism complaints during recruitment jumped 133% in Q1 2025.

Progression: where the bias compounds

AI is increasingly used in performance management, surfacing patterns in feedback, goal attainment, and productivity metrics. If trained on biased historical data, these tools risk reinforcing inequities in promotion, pay progression, and development access - at scale, and with algorithmic consistency that human decision-making never achieved. We acknowledge that audited, well-governed AI can deliver fairer hiring outcomes than unassisted human decision-making - which is precisely why governance is the issue, not the technology itself. Research from the Harvard Business Review (2025) found that when AI is adopted without that governance, it does not just apply a definition of merit - it reshapes what merit means, locking in one version that reflects the characteristics of those who were previously hired.

What the data shows

The ILO's March 2026 report found that 29% of female-dominated occupations are exposed to generative AI, compared with 16% of male-dominated roles. Among workers facing the hardest transition - those with limited savings, fewer transferable skills, and less access to retraining - 86% are women.

29% vs 16%

Female-dominated vs male-dominated occupations exposed to generative AI. Automation risk is not gender-neutral. (ILO, March 2026)

FAULT LINE 4 | The Leadership Gap

Everyone agrees AI is strategic. Almost nobody treats it that way.

What we heard

"We're brought in to manage the change. We're not in the room when the change is designed."

"AI is on the risk register. But the workforce implications aren't."

What the data shows

72% of S&P 500 companies now flag AI as a material risk in their public disclosures - up from just 12% in 2023.²² Yet even the most technology-adjacent C-suite roles lack recognised AI capability: only 44% of CIOs are rated as AI-savvy by their own CEOs - and CHROs are rated significantly lower still.¹⁸ 88% of organisations now use AI in at least one business function - up from 78% a year earlier. Yet only 21% are closely involved in AI strategy decisions at any meaningful level. In 2026, DEI success will be judged by pay equity, fair access to development, and transparent promotion pathways - not statements or workshops. As AI becomes more embedded, DEI must act as a safeguard preventing technology from reinforcing old inequalities.

What is at stake

62% of UK employers predicting AI-driven workforce reductions say clerical, junior managerial, and administrative roles are most at risk. These are often the entry points to organisations - and the talent pipeline for future leadership. When those roles disappear without replacement pathways, the leadership bench shrinks with them.

FAULT LINE 5 | The Dependency Risk

The faster we move, the less we think.

What we heard

What happens to human capability when we outsource thinking? Participants described watching junior colleagues reach for AI tools before attempting to solve problems themselves, and the erosion of institutional knowledge as experienced staff leave and their expertise is assumed to exist in the system.

"The concern is not that AI makes people lazier. It's that AI changes what people practise - and what they stop practising, they lose."

One participant offered a longer-term frame: AI will eventually become latent infrastructure, like electricity or WiFi - present everywhere, invisible, assumed. The anxiety we are experiencing now is the anxiety of transition. But the design choices made during this transition are not temporary. They will set the defaults that persist once the anxiety fades. Another participant raised a productive counter-challenge: perhaps the right response to intellectual decay is to let it happen first - to allow the pendulum to swing towards full AI dependency, learn from the cost of that, and then design the rebalancing deliberately. That is a brave institutional choice. Most organisations will not make it consciously. The question is whether they make it by accident.

What the data shows

The pattern is already visible in professional services. Harvey - an AI tool now deployed by most major UK law firms - writes and reviews contracts with approximately 99% accuracy. One managing partner described the consequence as an inverted pyramid: the firm no longer needs the volume of junior lawyers it once did. The barrel shape is coming. The question is whether organisations are designing for it or simply allowing it.

Gartner predicts that by end of 2026, 50% of global organisations will require AI-free skills assessments due to critical thinking atrophy. 57% of workers believe skill erosion - not job loss - will be AI's biggest workforce issue in 2026. Among major technology companies - predominantly US-based - entry-level hiring has dropped from 15% to under 7% of total

hiring. In the UK specifically, tech graduate vacancies fell 46% in 2024, with a projected further 53% drop by 2026.

What is at stake

If organisations stop hiring juniors in 2025, by 2030 they will face a shortage of the mid-level talent those juniors would have become. The roles being automated are often the roles where future leaders learned their craft. The efficiency gained today may be borrowed from the capability needed tomorrow.

FAULT LINE 6 | The Credibility Gap

The pressure to perform AI competence is producing decisions nobody can defend.

What we heard

One of the most striking observations from the roundtable did not come in the formal discussion. It came in the closing takeaways, when a participant from a cross-sector leadership role said simply: the panicking feeling that we have to perform AI competence is probably going to bite us.

It landed in the room because everyone recognised it. The knowledge gap in Fault Line 1 describes people not knowing enough about AI. This is different. This is about the social pressure to appear as though you do - to avoid looking behind the curve, to signal strategic credibility to boards and peers, to not be the leader who asks what might seem like a naive question.

The consequence is a specific kind of governance failure. Organisations procure AI tools to demonstrate commitment rather than to solve defined problems. Leaders endorse AI strategies they do not understand. HR and EDI leads, already excluded from decisions, find themselves unable to challenge technical claims they cannot interrogate. And at the other end of the spectrum, some senior leaders - aware they lack the knowledge to engage credibly - simply deny the relevance of AI altogether, creating a different version of the same problem.

"There are what I'm calling AI deniers in our organisation."

"There's no substitute for having people who know what they're doing. But defining people who know what they're doing is really difficult."

What the data shows

Research from Gartner (2025) found that even CIOs - the most technology-proximate C-suite role - are rated as AI-savvy by only 44% of CEOs. For CHROs the confidence gap is wider still. That gap runs in both directions. People leaders who lack technical vocabulary cannot challenge vendor claims, audit procurement decisions, or interrogate the outputs of tools they are responsible for governing. The result is a function that is simultaneously excluded from AI strategy and unequipped to demand inclusion.

81% of UK CEOs name AI investment as their top priority for 2026. Yet only 8% of leaders have deployed agentic AI to a point where it is delivering value. The gap between stated commitment and operational reality is precisely the environment in which credibility performance thrives - and in which poor governance decisions accumulate undetected.

What is at stake

The credibility gap has a specific workforce equity consequence. When AI adoption is driven by the need to be seen to act rather than the need to solve defined problems, the tools chosen are rarely the ones that would serve the broadest workforce. Frontline access, equitable reskilling, and demographic impact assessments are not the features that get

prioritised in a procurement process shaped by the desire to perform AI leadership. They are exactly the features that get deprioritised.

There is also a longer-term talent consequence. When leaders cannot distinguish between what AI genuinely does well and what it is claimed to do, they cannot protect the human capabilities that AI cannot replicate. They cannot have the conversation about where critical thinking must be preserved, because they cannot credibly engage with where it is being eroded. The performance of competence crowds out the practice of it.

81% vs 8%

UK CEOs naming AI as their top priority for 2026 vs the proportion who have deployed agentic AI to the point of delivering value. The gap is where credibility performance lives. (PwC, 2026)

4. Your Strategic Position: A SWOT for People Leaders

The fault lines above describe the risk landscape. But senior leaders need more than a diagnosis - they need to locate themselves strategically within it. The SWOT below is written specifically for UK People leaders navigating the AI and equity agenda in their organisations in 2026.

STRENGTHS • People leaders hold unique intelligence on workforce impact that no other function has • AI equity is now a board-level risk - creating a seat at the table for HR • UK legal framework (Equality Act, UK GDPR) requires human oversight of AI decisions • 71% of UK business leaders are maintaining or expanding DEI efforts (IoD, 2025) • Employment Rights Act 2025 mandates ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting - creating data infrastructure for equity monitoring	WEAKNESSES • Only 21% of HR functions are closely involved in AI strategy decisions • Most people leaders lack the technical vocabulary to challenge AI vendor claims • DEI budgets are the first to be cut under cost pressure • Shadow AI is already embedded - formal strategy is playing catch-up • Only 44% of CIOs are rated as AI-savvy by their CEOs - CHROs are rated significantly lower (Gartner CEO Survey, 2025)
OPPORTUNITIES • Organisations with structured AI upskilling are nearly twice as likely to see ROI • Frontline digital access programmes deliver 20%+ bottom-line growth • EU AI Act (August 2026) creates competitive advantage for UK orgs that prepare early • Ethnicity pay gap reporting infrastructure creates natural lens for AI equity audits	THREATS • US DEI rollback is creating direct UK pressure via US-parent companies (GSK, Accenture) • EU AI Act fully activates August 2026 - UK orgs with EU operations face compliance risk • No UK AI legislation yet - governance vacuum puts all liability on employers now • ICO automated decision-making guidance expected Spring 2026 - may tighten requirements

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The DEI backlash is creating appetite for evidence-based, outcome-focused inclusion work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entry-level pipeline erosion is borrowing from the mid-level talent bench of 2030 Apprenticeship levy cuts to Level 7 leadership funding remove a key mechanism for building mid-level capability at scale |
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The most important insight from this SWOT is the convergence of strength and opportunity. People leaders hold the workforce intelligence that no other function has. The legal and regulatory environment is creating both requirement and permission to act. The organisations that move first - building equity audits, AI governance structures, and structured reskilling pathways - will not just protect their workforces. They will build competitive advantage that takes years for others to replicate.

5. The EQUITAS™ Framework: A Governance Lens for Equitable AI

Across twelve practitioner conversations on four continents, a consistent pattern emerged: the organisations and individuals making the most progress on equitable AI were not those with the most sophisticated technology. They were those with the clearest commitments - commitments that were operational, not aspirational.

The EQUITAS™ Framework for Equitable AI distils those commitments into seven practical obligations. The name is deliberate: EQUITAS is Latin for equity, and the framework insists that equity is not an outcome to be managed but a practice to be maintained. Each commitment maps directly onto the fault lines identified in this paper.

	Commitment	What this means for People leaders
E	Examine whose world the data describes	Every AI tool used in your organisation was trained on someone's reality. Find out whose. Ask whether that population matches yours. If you cannot get a clear answer, that is a governance failure - and a legal risk.
Q	Question the black box	If an AI system cannot explain to you - in plain language - how it made a decision about a person, it should not be making those decisions. Explainability is not a technical nice-to-have. Under UK GDPR it is a legal requirement.
U	Understand what you are automating and Unite the room	AI governance committees must include the people who live the consequences of the decisions being made. If your AI governance board does not include HR, EDI leads, or employee representatives, it is making decisions about them without them.
I	Invest in human capabilities	The skills that matter most in the AI era - critical thinking, adaptive judgement, curiosity - are not technical. They require practice, not just understanding. Protect the roles, relationships, and experiences that develop them.
T	Track what matters before you need to defend it	If the measurement infrastructure is not built, the equity gains will be dismantled when political winds shift. Build your AI

A	Act with, not for	equity monitoring into your existing data architecture now - not as a response to a complaint, but as a governance standard.
		The people most affected by AI adoption must be involved in shaping it. Frontline workers, junior staff, and those in the highest-risk roles should not find out about AI changes through a town hall. They should be part of the design conversation.
S	Start before you are ready	The governance frameworks are not fully formed. The regulation is incomplete. The technology is evolving. None of that is a reason to wait. The default - doing nothing - is also a choice, and it is the choice that allows the two-tier workforce to become permanent.

EQUITAS™ is a trademark of Jenny Garrett Global. The framework is published in full in *AI for Equity: Creating a More Equitable Society for All* (Emerald Publishing, September 2026), co-authored by Jenny Garrett OBE and Leah-Sunshine Garrett.

THE DEFINING CHOICE: DELIBERATE vs REACTIVE

The clearest consensus from the roundtable was not about a specific risk or recommendation. It was about posture. The organisations making the most progress on AI adoption - and on doing it equitably - were not the fastest movers. They were the most deliberate ones. They were asking: what problem are we actually solving? Who does this affect and how do we know? What would we need to stop doing to make space for this? That posture - curious, structured, human-centred - is what distinguishes AI strategy from AI theatre. Most organisations are currently staging the latter while believing they are doing the former. The EQUITAS™ framework is a tool for building genuine strategy into governance - not just intentions, and not just optics.

6. Five Actions for This Quarter

These are not long-term strategic aspirations. They are actions that can begin now, grounded in the fault lines and framework above.

A note on constrained contexts

The actions below are aimed at People leaders with some freedom of movement. We recognise that many organisations - particularly in the NHS, local government, and heavily regulated sectors - operate under significant structural constraints: nationally determined job roles, legacy technology systems, limited procurement autonomy, and funding environments that make even incremental change difficult. If that is your context, the most important action may not be from the list below. It may be building the evidence base and the language to make the case for change upward - to national bodies, regulators, or funding authorities. This paper is designed to support that case.

1

Audit your AI tools for equitable impact - before the regulator does

Map every AI tool used in recruitment, screening, performance management, and promotion decisions. For each, ask: what data was it trained on? What are the shortlisting or rejection patterns by gender, age, and ethnicity? Under the Equality Act 2010 and UK

GDPR, the liability is yours. New ICO automated decision-making guidance is expected in Spring 2026. If you cannot answer these questions today, you are already behind. A standard AI equity audit typically covers: hiring data patterns by protected characteristic; progression and pay outcomes by demographic group; training access rates by role and income band; attrition analysis by tenure and seniority; and the decision logic of any automated screening or scoring tool.

2 Claim your seat in AI governance - with evidence, not just presence

People leaders who want influence over AI strategy need more than an invitation to the table. Arrive with workforce impact data, equity risk assessments, and a point of view that goes beyond compliance. Build an AI working group with HR, EDI, and Legal as equal partners - not a sub-committee reporting upward after decisions are made.

3 Design an AI access strategy - not just an AI training strategy

Training without access is theatre. Map who currently has access to AI tools - by role, level, and location. Ask whether that map reflects a deliberate equity strategy or an accidental one. The organisations seeing the greatest ROI from AI are those that extended access to frontline and operational roles, not just corporate functions.

4 Build structured reskilling pathways - especially for the roles most at risk

Administrative, clerical, and entry-level roles face the highest automation exposure - and they are disproportionately held by women, younger workers, and those with fewer transferable skills. Define now what the adjacent roles look like, what skills they require, and what investment is needed to move people into them. Waiting until those roles disappear is not a workforce strategy.

5 Protect the entry-level pipeline - it is your future leadership bench

The disappearance of graduate, internship, and junior roles is a long-term capability risk disguised as a short-term efficiency gain. Consider deliberately what roles young people need to develop judgement, institutional knowledge, and professional identity - and protect them, explicitly and visibly.

7. The Question Worth Taking Back

At the close of the roundtable, participants were asked a single question to carry back to their organisations:

Where in your organisation is AI adoption already creating a two-tier experience - and who is not talking about it yet?

The answer will tell you where your most urgent work is. It will also tell you something about your culture - whether the people closest to the problem feel safe naming it.

AI does not just reshape jobs. It reshapes who speaks, who is heard, and whose experience of work is treated as the norm. The EQUITAS™ framework is not a checklist. It is an orientation: towards the people most affected, the systems most likely to compound disadvantage, and the decisions that, once made, are hardest to reverse.

Preparing organisations for AI without automating inequality. That is both the challenge and the opportunity in front of you.

Where Does Your Organisation Stand? Six Diagnostic Questions

Use these questions to test your organisation's current position against each fault line. They are not a scorecard. They are a starting point for an honest conversation with your leadership team, your AI governance group, or your own thinking.

	Fault line	Diagnostic question
1	The Knowledge Gap	<i>If you asked your workforce to describe what AI is and how it applies to their specific role, what would they say? And do you actually know the answer to that question - or are you assuming?</i>
2	The Access Gap	<i>Draw a map of who in your organisation currently has a licence to use AI tools. Does that map reflect a deliberate strategy - or does it reflect who was in the room when the procurement decision was made?</i>
3	The Demographics Gap	<i>Look at the roles in your organisation with the highest exposure to automation. Then look at who holds those roles. Is your organisation actively designing what comes next for those people - or waiting to see what happens?</i>
4	The Leadership Gap	<i>When AI deployment decisions are made in your organisation, who is in the room? Is People function represented at the point of design - or called in afterwards to manage the consequences?</i>
5	The Dependency Risk	<i>Where in your organisation are people currently developing judgement, institutional knowledge, and critical thinking through doing difficult work? What happens to that development pipeline if the tasks that built it are automated?</i>
6	The Credibility Gap	<i>When your organisation discusses AI strategy, how many people in the room could confidently challenge a vendor's claims? And is anyone asking that question before the contracts are signed?</i>

If any of these questions surfaced something you do not have a clear answer to, that is useful information. It tells you where the conversation in your organisation needs to start.

If you would like to work through these questions with your leadership team, or use them as the basis for a structured AI equity audit, Jenny Garrett Global can facilitate that conversation.

About Jenny Garrett Global

Jenny Garrett Global (JGG)

A specialist leadership development consultancy in its 20th year. Our Tri-Level™ methodology has delivered 35%+ promotion rates and 98% recommendation scores across the NHS, financial services, local government, energy, and the charity sector.

Inclusive Leadership • Entrepreneurial Leadership • AI-Ready Leadership

Jenny Garrett OBE holds an OBE, is a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of HR Professionals, and is a graduate of MIT's AI Strategy and Leadership Programme. She co-hosts the AI for Equity podcast and co-authors AI for Equity: Creating a More Equitable Society for All (Emerald Publishing, September 2026).

If this paper has landed with something you are navigating in your organisation, we would welcome a conversation.

AI-Ready Leadership programmes: designed for CPO teams, People Director cohorts, EDI leads, and AI governance groups. We work at the intersection of inclusion, leadership, and AI - and we bring twenty years of doing that work in organisations like yours.

Senior roundtables: we convene regular peer conversations for senior people leaders on the themes explored here and beyond. If you would like to join a future session, or have peers who would benefit, please get in touch.

Get in touch

enquiries@jennygarrettglobal.com | jennygarrettglobal.com |

AI for Equity podcast: available on all major platforms

Notes and Sources

All sources current as of March 2026. Superscript numbers in the text refer to the notes below.

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