

AI Doesn't Reduce Work—It Intensifies It

Right now, many companies are worried about how to get more employees to use AI. After all, the promise of AI reducing the burden of some work—drafting routine documents, summarizing information, and debugging code—and allowing workers more time for high-value tasks is tantalizing.

But are they ready for what might happen if they succeed? While leaders are focused on promised productivity gains, they may find themselves surprised by the complex reality, and may not see what these gains are costing them until it's too late.

In our in-progress research, we discovered that AI tools didn't reduce work, they consistently intensified it. In an eight-month study of how generative AI changed work habits at a U.S.-based technology company with about 200 employees, we found that employees worked at a faster pace, took on a broader scope of tasks, and extended work into more hours of the day, often without being asked to do so. Importantly, the company did not mandate AI use. On their own initiative workers did more because AI made “doing more” feel possible, accessible, and in many cases intrinsically rewarding.

While this may sound like a dream come true for leaders, the changes brought about by enthusiastic AI adoption can be unsustainable, causing problems down the line. Once the excitement of experimenting fades, workers can find that their workload has quietly grown and feel stretched from juggling everything that's suddenly on their plate. That workload creep can in turn lead to cognitive fatigue, burnout, and weakened decision-making. The productivity surge enjoyed at the beginning can give way to lower quality work, turnover, and other problems.

This puts leaders in a bind. What should they do? Asking employees to self-regulate isn't a winning strategy. Rather, companies need to develop a set of norms and standards around AI use—what we call an “AI practice.”