Exploring Employee Experiences with AI-Driven Workflow Automation: A Qualitative Study Using Inductive Thematic Analysis

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Dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Cristina Mendonça.

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the MSc in Management with specialization in Strategy, Entrepreneurship & Impact, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 02.06.2025.

Abstract

This thesis explores how AI-driven workflow automation influences employees' experiences in the workplace, focusing on three core areas: autonomy, communication and both current and future expectations for AI integration. As tools such as generative AI become increasingly integrated into organizational settings, it is essential to understand their broader impact on everyday work dynamics, both individually and collaboratively. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing on 15 structured interviews with employees from various industries who actively use AI tools in their daily tasks. Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in their experiences. Findings reveal mixed effects of AI on workplace dynamics. AI was seen as improving operational efficiency and enhancing employee autonomy, particularly among junior staff, by reducing repetitive tasks and enabling more independent work. It also reshaped communication patterns, reducing informal exchanges and promoting more asynchronous, AI-mediated interactions. Trust and transparency emerged as critical factors shaping employees' experience with AI tools. The results suggest that AI should be introduced in ways that support teamwork and communication, rather than replace it. Future research should explore AI's long-term impact on relationships and how organizations can better support its use across cultures and industries.

Title: Exploring Employee Experiences with AI-Driven Workflow Automation: A Qualitative Study Using Inductive Thematic Analysis

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Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Workflow Automation, Employee Experience, Communication, Human Autonomy, Human-AI Collaboration, Generative AI, Organizational Change, Team Dynamics

Resumo

Esta tese explora como a automação de fluxo de trabalho impulsionada por IA influencia as experiências dos funcionários no ambiente de trabalho, com foco em três áreas principais: autonomia, comunicação e as expectativas atuais e futuras para a integração da IA. Com a crescente integração da IA generativa nas organizações, torna-se essencial entender o seu impacto nas dinâmicas de trabalho, tanto individuais como colaborativas. O estudo adota uma abordagem de pesquisa qualitativa, com base em 15 entrevistas estruturadas com funcionários de diversos setores que utilizam ativamente ferramentas de IA em suas tarefas diárias. A análise temática indutiva de Braun e Clarke (2006) foi utilizada para identificar padrões recorrentes nas experiências relatadas. Os resultados revelam efeitos mistos da IA nas dinâmicas do local de trabalho. A IA melhorou a eficiência operacional e aumentou a autonomia dos funcionários, especialmente entre os membros juniores da equipe, ao reduzir tarefas repetitivas e permitir um trabalho mais independente. Ela também remodelou os padrões de comunicação, reduzindo interações informais e promovendo trocas mais assíncronas mediadas por IA. Confiança e transparência surgiram como fatores críticos que moldam a experiência dos funcionários com as ferramentas de IA. Os resultados sugerem que a IA deve ser implementada de forma a apoiar o trabalho em equipe e a comunicação, em vez de substituí-los. Investigações futuras poderão aprofundar-se no impacto da IA nas relações ao longo do tempo e em como as organizações podem optimizar a sua utilização em diferentes culturas e sectores.

Título: Explorando Experiências de Funcionários com a Automação de Fluxo de Trabalho Impulsionada por IA: Um Estudo Qualitativo Usando Análise Temática Indutiva

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Palavras-chave: Inteligência Artificial (IA), Automação de Fluxo de Trabalho, Experiência do Funcionário, Comunicação, Autonomia Humana, Colaboração Humano-IA, IA Generativa, Mudança Organizacional, Dinâmica de Equipe

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my supervisor, Cristina Mendonça, for her constant support, extremely valuable feedback and clear guidance throughout my study.

I also want to thank the 15 interviewees for participating in my research and for sharing their insights and perspectives.

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AI.....*Artificial Intelligence*
GAI.....*Generative Artificial Intelligence*

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

"Artificial intelligence has arrived in the workplace and has the potential to be as transformative as the steam engine was to the 19th-century Industrial Revolution" (Mayer et al., 2025, p. 2). Evolving at a very rapid pace over the years, artificial intelligence (AI) is disrupting business models and increasing productivity across industries (Chauhan et al., 2022).

There are different types of AI, differentiating themselves through their various functionalities (Benyba et al., 2020). Examples are generative AI (GAI) tools, such as chatbots and virtual assistants (IBM Data and AI Team, 2023). Within a span of over just 2-3 years, GAI platforms have been transforming rapidly. Companies such as OpenAI, Google, Microsoft and Meta have developed their GAI to have advanced contextual understanding and to go from non-multimodal (text only) to multimodal, thus including the generation of text, images and audio (Mayer et al., 2025).

It is not only GAI seeing these advancements. Other AI automation tools such as Zapier, UiPath and Monday.com are significantly impacting business and creativity across industries through automating repetitive tasks, streamlining entire workflows and guaranteeing seamless collaboration across teams and departments. These tools are thus reshaping multiple industries, by driving efficiency and supporting both operational and creative work (Commencis, 2025). According to the Microsoft's Work Trend Index Report, AI usage among the workforce already reached nearly 75% in 2024 (Bishop, 2024).

This represents a very transformative impact AI and automation have on the current and future global workforce. A recent report by the World Economic Forum highlights that AI and automation are expected to transform 86% of businesses by 2030. According to further findings, these advancements are projected to generate approximately 170 million new jobs while displacing around 92 million existing roles and outdating 39% of existing workforce skill sets between 2025 and 2030 (Wheeler, 2025). This shift underscores the need for businesses and employees to adapt to an evolving job market shaped by technological progress.

However, despite AIs' transformative impact and wide-spread potential of job displacement, collaboration among AI and employees in the workplace across industries is rather seen as a complement and not a replacement of the workforce. As Harvard Business School professor

Karim Lakhani has said in a Harvard Business Review episode of *The New World of Work,* "AI is not going to replace humans, but humans with AI are going to replace humans without AI" (McKendrick, 2023).

1.2 Problem statement

Considering the transformative impact of AI and automation the workforce is currently experiencing and will very likely continue to in the future, it is interesting to see what further impact it has on different aspects in a collaborative workplace setting. Although there is extensive research on human-AI collaboration in a workplace setting, the existing research on how human-AI collaboration impacts employee experiences in a workplace setting, in comparison (e.g., Lozie et al., 2024), is limited. The aim of this research is to understand how the integration of AI automation tools influences employees' individual work experiences, communication practices, expectations for future AI use and their social interactions within the workplace. Therefore, the central research question in this study is:

> RQ: How does AI-driven workflow automation influence employees' experiences in the workplace, particularly in terms of autonomy, communication and expectations for future AI integration?

The research topic for this study can be divided into smaller and more specific research questions:

> RQ1: How does AI automation influence employees' sense of autonomy and their individual work roles within workplace teams?
>
> RQ2: In what ways does AI automation reshape communication practices in the workplace?
>
> RQ3: What are employees' current and future expectations, concerns and desires regarding the use of AI in their work environment?

This research was conducted through qualitative research using structured interviews with participants across different industries that have integrated AI automation into their workflow. The selection of participants was based on employees actively using AI automation. The goal was to examine how AI automation tools shape core aspects of the employee experience,

particularly in relation to communication practices, evolving roles and expectations around collaboration.

As the study should involve an analysis well-spread across different industries, it considered various AI automation tools used by different companies and departments across different industries. The list of automation tools ranged from chatbots, AI agents, content creators, transcription and meeting assistants, knowledge management tools, all the way to task and project managers.

1.3 Managerial and academic relevance

From an academic perspective, this study does not only add to the trending and increasing research on AI in the age of a rapid digital transformation we are experiencing, but specifically in workplace collaboration and organizational behavior.

While there is extensive research on AI's impact on productivity, efficiency, job automation and job displacement (Tiwari, 2024; Gao & Feng, 2023), there is limited understanding of how AI-driven automation shapes employees' daily work roles, their sense of autonomy and the way they communicate and engage within teams or departments. There are existing studies that focus on task automation and decision-making (Seeber, 2020) but overlook how these systems affect individual work dynamics, communication practices and employees' expectations about AI integration. Specific focus in the literature has also been done on GAI. For example, a recent qualitative study focused on GAI's impact on workplace learning, however primarily focusing on the workplace learning impact of a specific GAI automation tool, namely Microsoft 365 Co-pilot (Callari & Puppione, 2025).

By addressing this critical research gap, this study aims to serve as a foundational contribution to the emerging discussion on the psychological and social implications of AI in the workplace, particularly regarding employee autonomy, workplace communication and evolving attitudes toward AI integration. Unlike previous research, which has predominantly focused on GAI applications and their effects on workplace learning, role shifts and displacement, this study takes a more comprehensive approach. By incorporating qualitative research through structured interviews across industries, it represents a novel study in this field to consider a bigger spectrum of AI automation tools with a clear focus on employee experiences. Furthermore, this study places a distinct emphasis on the psychological and social dimensions of AI's impact,

particularly how these technologies influence employees' autonomy and role shifts, communication dynamics and overall experiences in AI-integrated work environments.

From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study aim to offer valuable insights for organizational leaders and practitioners that have already implemented or are considering implementing AI automation tools into the organizations existing workflow. Understanding how AI affects employee autonomy, communication and expectations enables managers to anticipate potential challenges in engagement, alignment and collaborative culture and act accordingly with relevant training and onboarding methodologies. This knowledge can also inform the development of targeted strategies to support employee engagement, preserve collaborative culture and foster a safe and effective environment as organizations integrate AI automation into their workflows and navigate digital transformation.

1.4 Thesis' structure

Following this introductory chapter, a comprehensive literature review examines key concepts related to AI-driven workflow automation in professional environments, with particular focus on employee autonomy, communication practices and psychological and social responses to AI integration. This chapter explores existing research that has been done over the past years, focusing on AI's role and integration into the existing workflow and its broader implications for organizational structures and human interactions. Particular attention is given to studies that address employee adaptation, evolving communication patterns and the anticipated role of AI in future work environments.

The methods chapter outlines the qualitative research approach adopted for this study. The primary data collection method consists of structured interviews with professionals at various hierarchical levels within companies across industries. This chapter elaborates on the rationale behind selecting a qualitative research design, the process of formulating interview questions and the specific criteria used for participant selection. Additionally, it discusses how the research ensures reliability and validity in data collection and analysis.

The results chapter consists of thematic analysis, which identifies key patterns and recurring themes that emerge from the qualitative data collected, supported by relevant examples and quotes from participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis addresses employees' shifting

roles and autonomy, changes in communication structures and practices and their current and future expectations regarding the integration of AI automation into the workplace.

Finally, the discussion of the study's results follows, backing and comparing the findings with existing literature and theories on workplace collaboration and AI automation. It further addresses the implications of the findings, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant studies to provide context for the present research and to highlight key findings that inform the central research question: "How does AI-driven workflow automation influence employees' experiences in the workplace, particularly in terms of autonomy, communication and expectations for future AI integration?"

The literature was screened on recurring themes and patterns. As the goal was to identify existing research that primarily tackles the concept of human-human collaboration, specifically social synergies and team dynamics, the focus while screening was put into studies that address the impact on human-human collaboration through human-AI collaboration on a individual, collaborative and social level. It was noticeable, that there is extensive research and implications on the impact of AI and automation on workplace collaboration, however primarily focusing on a single AI or automation tool, such as GAI or chatbots (Callari & Puppione, 2025; Cordon et al., 2023) and not a wider spectrum of automation tools. Second, most of the literature found has its focus on the impact on human-AI collaboration, how machines and humans act as teammates (Seeber, 2020) rather on the impact AI has on individual experiences and human-human collaboration.

To map out what has already been explored and to guide the direction of this study, the literature review is structured, starting with the foundations of AI and progressing through its role in an organizational context, impacts on autonomy, communication, collaboration and employees' expectations. To give a better overview of the literature, the different sections and key aspects covered are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Overview of literature review

Section	Key topics covered
Foundations of AI	Types of AI technologies (e.g., machine learning, NLP, robotics), emergence of GAI, LLMs like GPT-4, differences between traditional AI and GAI
AI in Organizational Contexts	GAI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Microsoft 365 Copilot), organizational productivity, communication shifts
AI and Human Autonomy	Concept of autonomy, algorithmic micro-domination, human control, AI identity threat, importance of transparency and communication
AI and Human Workplace Communication	Communication efficiency, AI-mediated tools, emotional connection with AI, risk of anthropomorphism
AI and Workplace Collaboration	Human-AI Teams (HATs), collaborative intelligence, team dynamics, operational efficiency, indirect effects on human-human collaboration
Employee Expectations and Attitudes towards AI	Human-AI symbiosis, transparency, explainability, Park's scale (human-likeness, adaptability, anxiety, etc.), ethical concerns
Identified Gap	Lack of focus on human-human collaboration, underexplored emotional and social aspects, diversity of AI tools

2.1 Foundations of AI

AI systems can be distinguished by the underlying technologies that power them, each designed to perform specific functions. These technologies include machine learning, deep learning, neural networks, natural language processing, rule-based expert systems, robotic process automation and robotics (Benyba et al., 2020). What differentiates them is not only their technical structure but also the unique roles they play across various applications. For example,

one notable application that has become popular across industries such as finance, marketing and commerce is conversational AI. Conversational AI enables natural, human-like interactions through both voice and text (Benyba et al., 2020).

Recent advancements in AI have given rise to powerful models such as large language models, which underpin many modern GAI applications. These models are designed to process language sequentially and predictively, learning patterns through massive datasets (Ooi et al., 2025). As highlighted by Ooi et al. (2025), large language models such as GPT-4 and Bard represent a new paradigm in AI and are systems that can not only understand input but also generate coherent, contextually rich content in the form of text, images and code. Their core functionality is based on learning from extensive training data to produce outputs that resemble human creativity and reasoning (Ooi et al., 2025).

This new class of AI, commonly referred to as generative AI (GAI), builds on traditional neural network architectures to generate novel content across different modalities, such as text, audio, video and images, by identifying and mimicking patterns in existing data (Ooi et al., 2025). Unlike traditional AI, which typically focuses on analysis, automation or prediction, GAI has the unique ability to generate outputs that resemble human creativity and communication (Ooi et al., 2025).

Schuetz and Venkatesh (2020) suggest that as generative AI systems grow more advanced, they begin to take on increasingly human-like qualities, not just processing and generating information, but also adapting to context, interpreting unstructured data and engaging in interactive dialogue. As a result, AI moves beyond its traditional role as a tool, contributing more meaningfully to knowledge-based tasks and making it harder to separate human from machine effort (Schuetz & Venkatesh, 2020).

2.2 AI in Organizational Contexts

As GAI tools become more deeply integrated in organizational workflows, researchers are beginning to explore their effects on the restructuring of work and employee experiences. These technologies are increasingly capable of performing tasks once thought to only be performed by humans. For example, creativity, writing and problem-solving, traditionally considered core to knowledge work, are now being partially reproduced and carried out through advanced GAI tools (Ooi et al., 2025).

In practice, GAI tools, such as ChatGPT, have been used to support a range of workplace functions, from summarizing content to improving communication across teams. By generating quick drafts and simplifying complex information, these tools can enhance knowledge-sharing and streamline collaboration (Fahad et al., 2024). Further supporting these observations, Cardon et al. (2023) found that professionals widely view ChatGPT as a tool that enhances workplace productivity. Early adopters used ChatGPT not only to improve the clarity and structure of written communication but also to brainstorm ideas, generate content and improve overall work quality. The result is a shift in how employees approach both individual tasks and collaborative problem-solving, with many turning to AI tools for initial input or assistance before refining outcomes themselves (Cardon et al, 2023).

Callari and Puppione (2025) offer valuable insights through their study of Microsoft 365 Copilot. They found that employees generally experienced greater efficiency and support in completing tasks. At the same time, however, they noticed that AI tools were changing how people interacted at work. For example, some employees reported fewer informal check-ins or follow-up conversations, since AI-generated meeting notes and summaries reduced the need for verbal clarification. While this shift wasn't necessarily seen as negative, it highlights how AI has the potential to alter how teams communicate and collaborate.

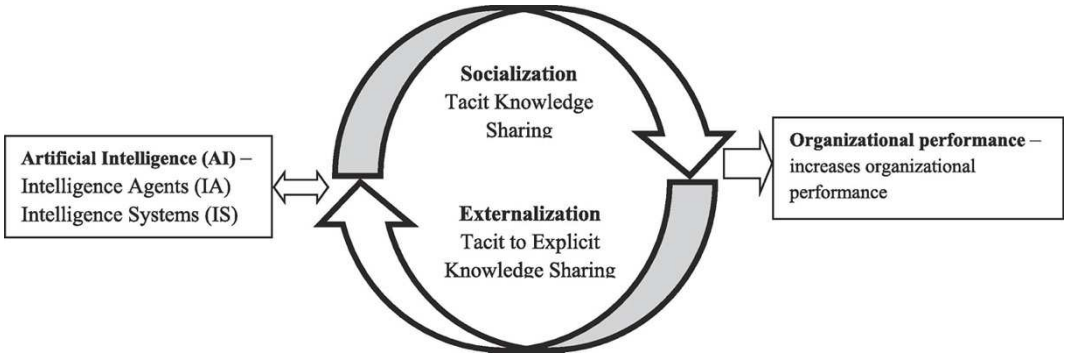
Lozie et al. (2024) offer a broader view, emphasizing that while GAI adoption can improve workflows and reduce repetitive tasks, its effects are not uniform. In their study, participants highlighted concerns related to accuracy, over-reliance and job security. Some employees saw clear benefits in reduced mental workload and more efficient task handling, while others raised questions about the long-term implications for skill development and team dynamics.

Overall, the integration of GAI into organizational settings presents a complex picture. It is not only reshaping how tasks are completed, but also influencing how people communicate, collaborate and relate to their work. The promise of productivity gains is clear, but so too are the challenges that come with reconfiguring the social and cognitive aspects of work.

Benbya et al. (2020) found that, in terms of AI and the future of work, recent and future advancements in AI will impact the workplace in how organizations will be managed, as well as how tasks will be coordinated within. This perspective is backed by Shamim et al. (2022), which agree that the continuous advancement of AI will affect organizations and improve organizational performance and its competitive advantage.

AI technologies are increasingly reshaping the landscape of organizational knowledge management by facilitating complex knowledge-sharing processes. As AI technologies continue to develop and become more sophisticated in their design and application organizations are compelled to reevaluate their priorities and strategies. Olan et al. (2022) employed a comprehensive data sampling method that encompassed employees across strategic, mid-managerial and operational tiers to capture a holistic view of knowledge dynamics within organizations. Their results suggest that, in order to guarantee an improvement in organizational performance, integrating AI has to be linked with knowledge-sharing practices rather than just implementing AI alone within the organization. This is shown in Figure 1, which illustrates this concept of integrating AI within a knowledge sharing context, in order to add new knowledge, improve existing business processes and overall organizational performance.

Fig. 1 - An integrated AI-KS system for organizational performance.



Adapted from Olan et al. (2022)

Mikalef et al. (2023) further clarifies the dimensions of AI's impact in an organizational context. While their findings indicate that AI capabilities positively influence organizational performance through process automation and cognitive insight, the study reveals that these gains can't be seen when it comes to cognitive engagement, which involves sense-making, creativity and emotional investment in work. The possible reasons for this include a mismatch between expectations and outcomes, early-stage deployment challenges and the additional burden placed on employees to support AI systems such as chatbots (Mikalef et al., 2023).

This highlights that AI alone cannot replace human judgment and motivation, reinforcing the importance of aligning AI tools with organizational culture, employee capabilities and collaborative practices.

2.3 AI and Human Autonomy

Autonomy, in the context of human-centered AI, refers to the capacity for self-governance, specifically, the ability to form one's own values, make meaningful choices based on those values and act accordingly (Laitinen & Sahlgren, 2021).

Recent research highlights both opportunities and risks regarding AI's impact on human autonomy. Prunkl (2024) presents a conceptual framework that outlines how AI can simultaneously support and constrain autonomous action. On the one hand, AI can serve as a valuable tool that enhances human agency by aiding in complex decision-making processes, a view referred to as "autonomy as agency." In this role, AI systems act as assistive technologies that support users in achieving their goals. On the other hand, autonomy may be undermined when AI systems begin to act less like tools and more like agents. This occurs when users rely too heavily on algorithmic suggestions, gradually shifting decision-making away from their own reasoning or values. Prunkl (2024) notes that repeated exposure to AI-generated recommendations may lead to diminished individual reflection and reduced critical engagement, negatively affecting autonomy over time.

Al-Sulaiti et al. (2024) stress that even in highly automated or AI-augmented contexts, human responsibility remains central. They argue that AI systems are increasingly used as decision support tools rather than autonomous decision-makers, especially in high-risk tasks. Their findings show that despite varying levels of AI involvement, humans are expected to verify AI-generated outcomes and transparency requirements should be tailored to the task's risk level. This reinforces the idea that maintaining human control is not only a technical concern but a core ethical and organizational principle.

Additionally, Fossa (2025), building on Danaher's (2019) work, further explores how AI systems can influence human autonomy. He outlines three key conditions that support autonomy: rationality, optionality and independence. While AI can help people make better decisions by reducing mental workload or offering helpful suggestions, it also carries risks. Danaher (2019) refers to one of these risks as "algorithmic micro-domination", a process where users are gently pushed towards certain choices over time. This can gradually limit how free people feel in their decisions, even if the system appears neutral or helpful. According to Fossa (2025), whether AI supports or undermines autonomy mainly depends on how it's designed. Systems that allow for user control, offer transparency and adapt to individual needs are far

more likely to preserve autonomy than those that guide users toward predefined outcomes (Fossa, 2025).

On the contrary, Mirbabaie et al's. (2021) research introduce the concept of "AI identity threat". When AI tools take over parts of a job or make tasks feel more data-driven and measurable, some employees feel like their roles are losing value. Participants in the study by Mirbabaie et al. (2021) emphasized that transparent and well-communicated approaches to AI implementation are essential for preserving employee autonomy. When AI systems were introduced without proper explanation or opportunities for employees to understand and engage with the technology, individuals reported feeling a loss of control and reduced ability to influence their work environment (Mirbabaie et al., 2021).

2.4 AI and Human Workplace Communication

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful workplace collaboration. Sicilia and Palazón (2023) emphasize its central role in knowledge-sharing, while Marks et al. (2001) underline its importance for coordination and effective teamwork. Adu-Oppong et al. (2024) further highlight that strong communication practices contribute to increased productivity, help build relationships among employees and ensure the optimal use of available resources. In an era of growing globalization and increasingly diverse teams, communication remains a vital element of a productive and adaptive work environment (Rana, 2023).

Beyond communication, fostering social connectivity within the workplace has been shown to improve collaboration and enhance employee well-being. Organizations benefit significantly from encouraging informal connections and interpersonal trust among team members, which can result in higher engagement and more cohesive teamwork (Birmingham & Holt-Lunstad, 2025; Prasanth & Janani, 2023).

To support both formal and informal communication, many organizations have adopted digital tools that enhance how teams interact. These platforms facilitate faster knowledge exchange, improve problem-solving and provide structured and accessible channels for interaction (Fahad et al., 2024). Recent empirical evidence by Florea and Croitoru (2025) supports the idea that AI systems improve workplace communication across several dimensions, including message reception, acceptance and feedback, which in turn enhances employee performance. Their study found that AI-driven tools not only streamline information flow but also reduce

miscommunication and enable faster, clearer interactions across organizational teams (Florea & Croitoru, 2025). As such, communication becomes more flexible and efficient, particularly in remote or hybrid environments.

Zimmerman et al. (2024) point out that as AI systems begin to look, sound and behave more like humans, through features such as tone of voice and conversational language, people often start to form emotional connections with them. This human tendency to see machines as more than they are, known as anthropomorphism, can create a disconnect between what users feel the AI offers and what it's actually capable of (Zimmermann, 2024). As people start interacting with AI in ways that resemble real social relationships, there's a risk that these artificial bonds could start to replace genuine human interactions. In a workplace setting, that might mean less engagement with teammates, weakening trust in each other and everyday social connections that are vital to strong collaboration (Driskell et al., 2018).

These concerns are supported by Gabelaia et al. (2024), whose study revealed that while AI tools often enhance communication speed and clarity, they also introduce challenges such as misunderstandings and weakened interpersonal connection, which challenges Florea & Croitoru's (2025) and Patil's (2024) view of reducing miscommunications and enabling clearer interactions. Their mixed-methods research found that communication dynamics were the most significant predictor of AI's perceived organizational impact, with employees expressing both appreciation for improved workflow and concern over the loss of relationship quality (Gabelaia et al., 2024).

2.5 AI and Workplace Collaboration

Much of the existing literature on AI in the workplace centers on human-AI collaboration, highlighting both its potential and its challenges. Research has shown that AI tools can improve productivity by automating routine tasks, enabling employees to focus on higher-value work and facilitating real-time collaboration (Nguyen et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2020). However, studies also emphasize that successful integration depends on organizational readiness, continuous upskilling and clearly defined human-AI roles (Brown et al., 2018; Tiwari, 2024).

Emerging concepts such as Human-AI Teams (HATs) and collaborative intelligence underscore the importance of understanding team dynamics and individual differences, particularly in contexts where AI acts as a collaborative agent (Schmutz et al., 2024; Seeber et

al., 2020). Seeber et al. (2020) propose that AI systems, when thoughtfully designed, can support group-level collaboration by guiding discussions, offering relevant input and shaping decision-making processes. Their concept of collaborative intelligence stresses that the joint performance of humans and AI depends not just on technical capabilities but also on how well AI adapts to social context and preserves human agency. They also caution that poor system design can lead to bias, loss of transparency and reduced participation in group decision-making (Seeber, 2020).

Despite promising performance gains when AI is tailored to specific contexts, one-size-fits-all implementations have been shown to limit effectiveness (Sowa et al., 2021). Scholars consistently call for more human-centered approaches to training, trust-building and ethical integration in order to mitigate fear of job displacement and foster better collaboration.

Yet, the indirect effects of AI on human-human collaboration remain comparatively underexplored. Tortorella et al. (2024) and Patil (2024) found that AI can enhance efficiency and free up time for interpersonal interactions and engagement,. However, its influence on emotional and cognitive aspects of employee engagement is mixed (Tortorella et al., 2024). Some workers report feeling empowered, while others experience concerns over role identity and job security (Tortorella et al., 2024). These findings raise important questions about whether AI truly strengthens social components in teams or just streamlines tasks at cost.While human-AI collaboration may support operational performance (Wilson et al., 2018), it does not replicate the richness of human interaction. As Patel et al. (2010) argue, effective teamwork relies on multiple individuals working in harmony, something current AI technologies cannot fully achieve. These findings suggest that the broader organizational and social impacts of AI, including how it shapes communication, team dynamics and trust among colleagues, deserve closer attention. For this study, the focus will be shifting from human-AI interaction to the social component of AI-augmented teams, exploring how automation alters the way humans collaborate with one another in work environments

2.6 Employee Expectations and Attitudes towards AI

As AI technologies become more integrated into organizational workflows, employees are not only adapting to new tools but also forming distinct expectations about how these tools should function and support their work. Understanding these expectations is essential, as they play a

key role in shaping attitudes toward AI, influencing adoption, trust and long-term collaboration between humans and machines.

Jarrahi (2018) introduces the concept of human–AI symbiosis, emphasizing that employees tend to view AI positively when it enhances, rather than replaces, human decision-making. Workers generally expect AI to support tasks that are repetitive or data-heavy, allowing them to focus on higher-level responsibilities such as strategy, creativity and interpersonal work. At the same time, there is a growing expectation for transparency, employees want to understand how AI systems arrive at their outputs and retain the ability to question or override those suggestions. In this light, AI is most welcomed when it is seen as an assistant that empowers rather than dictates (Jarrahi, 2018).

Expanding on this, Koenig (2025) proposes a multidimensional framework that helps explain how employees relate to AI. He identifies three overlapping modes of acceptance: user-centered, delegation-based and societal. On a personal level, employees expect AI systems to be helpful and easy to use. When it comes to delegation, trusting AI to perform decisions or actions, employees increasingly demand explainability and accountability. They want to know not only that an AI system works, but how and why it produces certain outputs. Finally, from a broader societal standpoint, employees expect organizations to consider ethical implications, fairness, employment impacts and long-term risks of AI deployment. These expectations reflect concerns not just about personal benefit but about the social responsibility surrounding AI integration.

To add further insight, Park et al. (2024) developed and validated a scale, which captures how employees perceive AI in professional settings. Their study identified six distinct dimensions of employee attitudes: perceived human-likeness, adaptability, quality of AI, AI use anxiety, job insecurity and personal utility. These dimensions highlight both the functional expectations, such as reliability, usefulness, adaptability and the emotional responses employees experience, such as anxiety about job replacement or discomfort with AI's growing presence. Notably, their findings show that positive attitudes toward AI are associated with greater job satisfaction and openness to future AI integration, while negative perceptions, particularly around job insecurity and AI anxiety, can reduce organizational commitment and acceptance (Park, 2024). This suggests that employee expectations are not only about what AI can do, but also about how it is implemented, explained and aligned with human values and needs.

2.7 Identified Gap

The existing literature provides valuable insights into the technological foundations of AI, its integration into organizational workflows and its effects on autonomy, communication, collaboration and employee attitudes. However, most studies tend to focus on specific tools, particularly generative AI (Callari & Puppione, 2025; Cordon et al., 2023) and examine either task efficiency or human-AI collaboration in isolation. Research addressing broader human-human dynamics within AI-augmented workplaces remains relatively scarce.

While scholars have explored productivity gains and shifts in decision-making (e.g., Ooi et al., 2025; Callari & Puppione 2025; Seeber, 2020), fewer studies investigate how AI transforms interpersonal relationships, informal communication or role identity. Even work on autonomy and communication often centers on technical outcomes or implementation success, with limited attention to how employees feel about their roles and connections at work (e.g., Mikalef et al., 2023; Mirbabaie et al., 2021).

To date, few studies have qualitatively examined how AI reshapes day-to-day experiences such as trust, ownership, team dynamics and collaboration, particularly from the employee's point of view. Furthermore, there is a lack of research addressing how diverse array of AI tools, not just GAI, collectively influence workplace culture across various industries.

This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a qualitative, employee-centered exploration of how AI-driven workflow automation affects autonomy, communication and expectations in workplace settings. By focusing on multiple AI tools and capturing how employees experience these technologies socially and emotionally, the research contributes novel insights into how AI reshapes the employee experiences of organizational life.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research has proven to be beneficial in terms of gaining insights and subjective opinions on pre-defined topics and have a “conversation with a goal” (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 3). Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research requires a much smaller sample in order to gain valuable insights on the desired research topic (Grossoehme, 2014). Given that the study focuses on the impact of AI on autonomy, communication and expectations for future AI integration, a qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of employees' experiences, perceptions and interactions. Interviews, in particular, provide the flexibility to develop specific themes while allowing participants to share insights that might not emerge in standardized surveys. By using this method, the goal is to capture the subjective and relational aspects of AI’s influence in the workplace, which are essential for understanding its broader implications.

3.2 Interview Design

The qualitative data was collected through structured interviews. The participants recruited for the interviews consisted of 15 professionals across different industries who actively use AI automation tools in their daily workflows. The selection followed a diverse sampling strategy through LinkedIn and previous work connections to ensure different organizational settings and job roles.

To ensure the relevance of participant insights to the research objectives, inclusion criteria were defined as follows:

a) A minimum of three months of active usage of AI automation tools in their current role to ensure sufficient experience with the technologies.
b) At least one year of professional experience within a company.
c) The participant should be familiar with and actively using at least one AI technology embedded in workflow automation processes (e.g., automation bots, AI-based scheduling tools, content creation tools and virtual meeting or data-processing systems).

The interview script was prepared beforehand with a range of structured questions and can be found in Appendix A. The questions cover the following sub-topics:

The first section, Participant Profile, gathered information about each participant, including their professional background, current job role and industry-specific context. Given that the study focuses on professionals across different industries, understanding their hierarchical position and team structure is crucial in assessing how AI automation impacts collaboration at different levels. Additionally, participants were asked about their level of experience with AI technologies and whether their organization has a structured approach to AI adoption. This information helped contextualize their perspectives and experiences, allowing for a deeper analysis of the qualitative data.

The next section, AI Tools integrated into Daily Workflow, helped understand the extent of AI adoption, in which participants were asked to describe the specific AI-driven tools or automation software they use in their daily workflows. The questions explored how frequently these tools are used, whether they are integral to decision-making processes and how they support or transform traditional workflows. Additionally, the discussion went deeper into whether these tools are mandated by the organization or adopted at an individual/team level and whether participants feel adequately trained to use them effectively.

The next section, Overall Perception of AI Automation Tools, aimed to assess participants' overall attitudes toward AI-driven automation. Questions explored whether AI is perceived as an enhancement, a necessity or a potential challenge in their professional environment. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the advantages AI provides, such as efficiency, accuracy and workload reduction, as well as potential drawbacks, including over-reliance on automation, lack of transparency in AI-driven decisions or concerns about job displacement. The goal was to analyze their perceptions on common themes, contrasting views and industry-specific concerns.

Lastly, in the section on Perceived Impact on Workplace Collaboration, participants discussed whether AI has changed the way they interact with colleagues, altered team roles, or impacted the need for human oversight in decision-making. Additionally, the study assesses whether AI has introduced new challenges, such as reduced face-to-face communication, changes in team dynamics or shifts in employee autonomy and responsibilities. Insights from this section help determine whether AI fosters a more collaborative or isolated work environment within the industries of the participants.

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed and anonymized using participant codes. The transcripts were stored securely and used as the primary data source for the qualitative analysis.

3.3 Interview Sample

The interview sample consists of 15 participants across different industries or job clusters. The transcribed interview length ranged between 20 – 40 minutes. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed and a letter of formal consent was signed by each participant.

Table 2 - Interview participants

Interview Participants		
Participant	**Job Position**	**Industry**
P1	Business Analyst	Consulting
P2	Investment Analyst	Finance/Banking
P3	Portfolio Manager	Finance/Real Estate
P4	Growth & Operations Lead	Startup Ecosystem
P5	Client Management Associate	Research
P6	Product Manager	IT/Tech
P7	Associate Consultant	IT/Tech
P8	Investment Analyst	Finance/Banking
P9	Corporate Markets Trainee	Finance/Banking
P10	Corporate Lawyer	Law
P11	Startup Accelerator	Startup Ecosystem
P12	Business Development Representative	Startup Ecosystem
P13	Marketing Manager	Startup Ecosystem
P14	UX Designer	E-commerce
P15	Investment Associate	Finance/Banking

All 15 interviews were conducted online through video calls. At the beginning of each session, interviewees were once again reminded of the informed consent process, including their right to confidentiality, the secure handling of their responses and their ability to terminate or retract their participation at any point during the interview as seen in Appendix B. At the end of the interview, participants received a debriefing, stating the aim of the study and the option to receive a summary of the research findings if interested.

3.4 Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis to uncover major patterns and repeating themes in the qualitative data from the interviews, backed by relevant examples and statements from participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is well-suited for this study as it provides a systematic approach to identifying patterns within qualitative data while allowing for flexibility in interpreting complex social phenomena (citation missing). Given the focus is on autonomy, communication and expectations for future AI integration, this method enables an in-depth exploration of how AI integration shapes employees' experiences (citation missing). Thematic analysis facilitates the identification of recurring themes across participants' experiences, ensuring that both commonalities and contradicting perspectives are captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this case, an inductive thematic analysis approach was followed, which is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This makes the thematic analysis entirely driven through the data from the interview transcripts.

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis approach suggests a six-stage process that should be followed in order. These steps include familiarizing yourself with the data, coding the data, generating the first initial themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes and lastly writing everything up and producing the body of analysis.

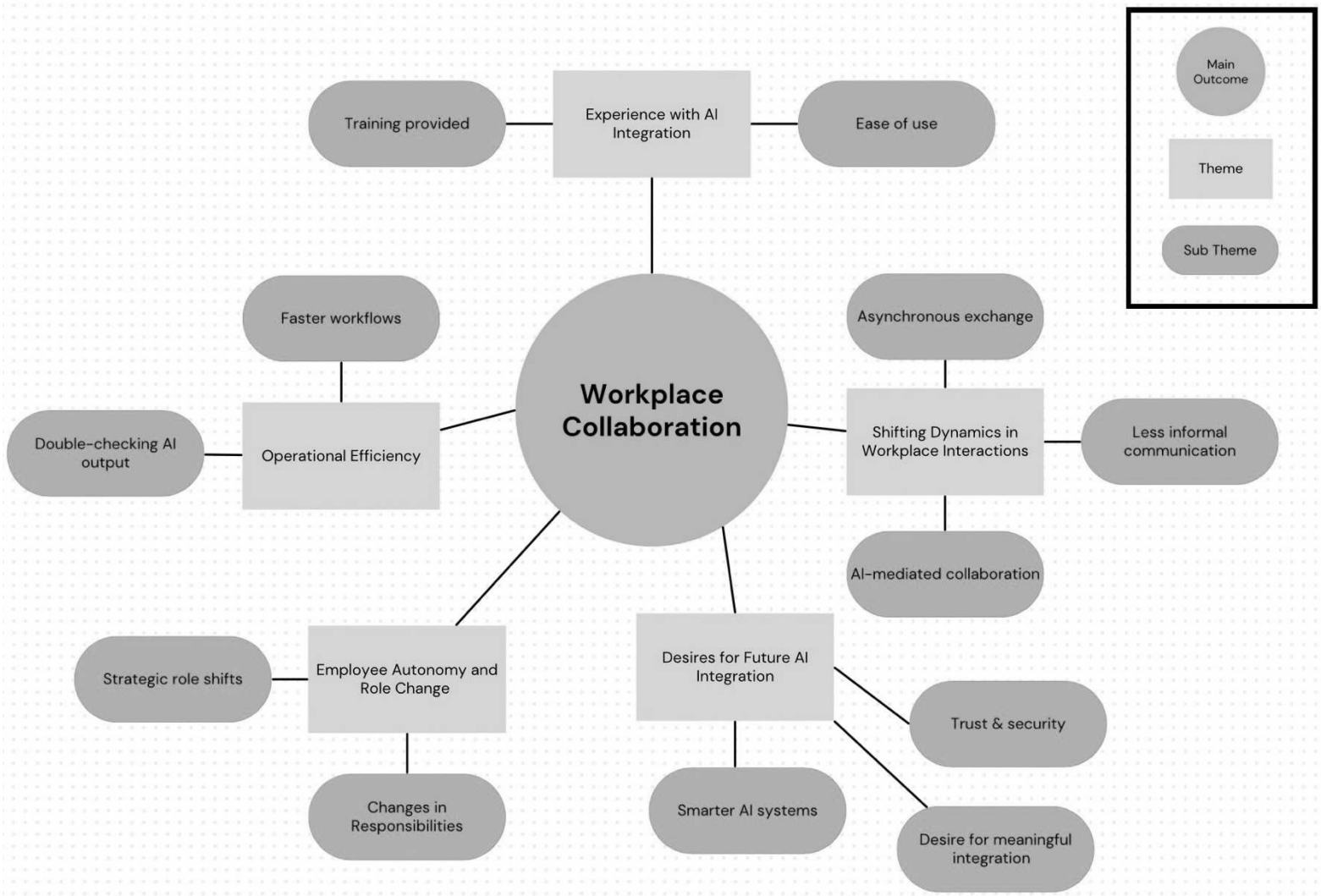
The first step was data familiarization. In total, there are 15 interview scripts that were transcribed. One interview was conducted in German as the participant felt more comfortable in their native language. After the interview was conducted, the German transcript was translated back into English. Each transcript ultimately provided a structured summary of participant responses to each interview question.

The second step was the coding procedure. All transcripts were screened and relevant quotes and phrases of the interview scripts were associated to codes. For this, the qualitative data analysis tool Delve was used (Delve, n.d.). Delve is designed to facilitate thematic analysis by providing a platform for coding, organizing and interpreting qualitative data such as interview transcripts. With their codebook feature, all relevant codes and associated quotes were organized in one place. Codes were reviewed for overlap, conceptual similarity and recurrence across interviews. These code clusters formed the basis of the thematic structure.

After all interview transcripts went through the coding process, the first initial themes and sub-themes were generated. The goal in this process was to identify similarities and patterns

between the initially generated code clusters, encompassing several codes into a single theme. For this, a thematic map was designed, which demonstrates the connections between themes and sub-themes, which is displayed in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2 - Thematic map



The thematic map presented above offers a structured visual representation of the core themes and sub-themes that have been generated from the data. It reflects how participants experience AI integration across various dimensions of workplace collaboration. With the themes now clearly defined and situated within a broader conceptual structure, the groundwork has been laid for analysis. The next chapter will explore each theme in detail, illustrating the findings through relevant quotes from participants and linking them back to the central research question.

4 Findings

This section presents the findings from the 15 interviews conducted during the data collection phase. As outlined in the previous chapter, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis framework for qualitative data. Guided by the central research question of how AI-driven workflow automation influences employees' experiences in the workplace, particularly in terms of autonomy, communication and expectations for future AI integration, the analysis identified and explored several key themes. Each theme is examined in relation to the study's primary research objectives and relevant literature in the field. Participant quotes have been linked to specific themes and sub-themes to support analysis, shown in Appendix C. In total, five themes were generated with corresponding sub-themes and a description of each, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 - Generated themes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Description
Operational Efficiency	Faster workflows Double-checking AI output	This theme explores how AI automation reshapes routine work by improving speed, clarity and task execution across teams. However, the need to verify AI-generated content emerged as a dominant concern.
Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions	Less informal communication Asynchronous exchange AI-mediated collaboration	This theme explores how AI alters the structure and tone of team communication. Traditional in-person or spontaneous interactions were seen to be replaced by asynchronous and written communication, often mediated through AI-generated summaries and task automation tools.
Employee Autonomy and Role Change	Strategic role shifts Change in responsibilities	This theme explores how AI enables greater independence, especially among junior staff, while also transforming the expectations and content of various roles.
Experiences with AI Integration	Training provided Self-exploration	This theme addresses how employees learn to integrate AI into their work, whether it is through formal training or self-guided exploration. Some organizations provided structured support through workshops and training, while others left employees to figure it out on their own.
Desires for Future AI Integration	Smarter AI systems Trust & security Desire for meaningful integration	This theme captures participants' forward-looking hopes and expectations for future AI integration in the workplace.

4.1 Operational Efficiency

A prominent theme that emerged across participant accounts was how AI automation tools shape their day-to-day work experience, particularly by increasing efficiency in handling routine tasks. All 15 participants across industries noted that these tools help streamline routine and repetitive tasks, allowing more time to be allocated to strategic thinking and creative problem-solving. Tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft Co-Pilot were commonly mentioned, with participants using them for a wide range of activities, from summarizing and proofreading to data analysis and document formatting.

Participants frequently highlighted that AI tools helped them work both faster and smarter by organizing information, summarizing large amounts of data or text and accelerating overall decision-making in their daily tasks:

> "The number one benefit is definitely time savings. But also, clarity. AI helps cut through clutter, whether that's summarizing a huge email thread or turning a messy meeting into structured notes. When it comes to making decisions, having quick insights or summaries can really accelerate the process, especially when deadlines are tight" (P6, Product Manager)

Notably, the increase in efficiency went beyond individual tasks and performance, also improving team collaboration. The integration of AI automation into daily workflows was seen to free up time across teams, enabling them to focus more on tasks that demand strategic thinking and collective problem-solving, as well speed up decisions within the team.

> "Collaboration is more efficient now. With automated workflows and documentation, we can focus more on brainstorming or strategic work." (P4, Startup Ecosystem).

> "...if I use ChatGPT to draft a section of a report that outlines our view on a deal, that helps present the argument in a more structured way. It doesn't change the substance of the decision, but it helps others understand it better, and that might speed things up slightly" (P2, Investment Analyst).

At the same time, participants made it clear that efficiency did not mean full reliance on AI output. 12 out of the 15 participants explicitly mention, that they always find themselves double-checking AI outputs, especially when accuracy was important. This constant need for oversight introduces an extra layer of responsibility, which contradicts itself with efficiency and time saved through AI automation.

> "In terms of workload, it can go either way. Sometimes the tools reduce workload by speeding up tasks, but other times they can create extra work, especially if the output isn't 100% accurate. For example, there have been instances where I had to double-check AI-generated results because of small inaccuracies" (P11, Startup Accelerator)

These reflections can be linked back to RQ1, especially regarding their sense of autonomy and individual work roles in the workplace. They show that while AI tools are clearly boosting speed and efficiency, the main gain isn't just about automation replacing effort. It's also about how people are thinking and working differently, how tasks get done quicker, which allows for more time being saved and opens a deeper focus on strategic work. Yet, on the contrary, there is still hesitation, due to the clear need to double-check and re-think AI content.

4.2 Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions

While operational efficiency focuses on task execution, this theme explores how AI automation tools are transforming communication practices among colleagues in the workplace. Although

participants did not mention a clear or noticeable shift in how they interact with their colleagues, they (P7, P11, P3, P4, P14, P15 & P6) mentioned moving away from spontaneous, real-time conversations toward more asynchronous and written exchanges. Rather than reducing the amount of communication, AI appears to be transforming the medium of communication.

Many participants observed a clear shift toward asynchronous communication, with written updates increasingly replacing real-time conversations. For some participants, this shift isn't about talking less, it's about talking differently. As P7 stated:

> "I wouldn't really say that there's a direct correlation between AI and how often I speak or I've spoken to my colleagues..But definitely what has changed is the way I communicate and how I communicate… there's been a huge shift to towards like more written communication" (P7, Associate Consultant).

Participants, such as P11, pointed out the loss of post-meeting moments and casual follow-ups after meetings:

> "I wouldn't say communication has changed drastically overall. However, the AI note-taking tool we've integrated into our meetings has definitely reduced the need for follow-up conversations. While post-meeting discussions still happen, they're less frequent now." (P11, Startup Accelerator)

In a separate reflection, P11 pointed out:

> "I notice we rely more on written updates and AI-generated summaries than direct meetings." (P11, Startup Accelerator)

The use of AI tools, especially meeting assistants and summarization features, was seen by participants to reduce or replace follow-up conversations entirely, shifting interaction into more written and structured formats. Rather than reducing the overall volume of communication, participants are perceiving AI to be reshaping the form and tone of interactions, moving interactions away from face-to-face verbal dialogue and toward more concise and asynchronous communication.

However, not all participants (P1, P2, P8, P9, P10) experienced a shift. Some reported that their communication styles remained largely unchanged, particularly in organizations where face-to-face interaction is still the norm.

> "AI hasn't really changed our communication patterns. Most tools are used individually, and we're still an office-first company. We prioritize face-to-face interaction." (P4, Startup Ecosystem)

> „When it comes to live communication, like meetings or direct messages, nothing has changed much. We still talk in person or use Teams for quick updates "(P2, Investment Analyst)

These reflections link back to RQ2, showing that AI automation is not necessarily reducing communication but transforming it, shifting from verbal to written formats and from synchronous to asynchronous exchanges mostly due to AI summary and meeting assistants

integrated into their workflows. This structural change redefines how employees coordinate, align and update one another in their daily work.

4.3 Employee Autonomy and Role Change

Another significant effect observed among participants, particularly those in junior roles, was a growing sense of autonomy. The use of AI tools, especially chatbots and AI-powered assistants, enabled junior employees to work more independently by helping them generate content, refine ideas and validate concerns without always needing input from supervisors. As a result, they experienced greater confidence and autonomy in their tasks.

> "People are able to move more autonomously, especially juniors. You don't need to ask someone how to start every time. You just ask ChatGPT and you keep going." (P6, Product Manager)

> "More autonomy for sure. Juniors can now pull together preliminary analyses or decks with minimal oversight, which boosts confidence and frees up senior team members for strategic work." (P15, Investment Associate)

This increase in autonomy wasn't just functional, it was also emotional. Participants also described feeling more confident, empowered and proactive in their tasks and projects. With AI assisting on repetitive tasks, employees felt safer taking initiative, trying out ideas and acting without waiting for approval.

> "I'd say AI just makes life easier. It allows me to work efficiently even when I'm not an expert in a specific area. It speeds things up and helps me handle topics I otherwise wouldn't be able to tackle on my own. So overall, I'd say the impact has been overwhelmingly positive for me." (P4, Startup Ecosystem)

While AI enabled greater autonomy, it also redefined what it meant to fulfill one's role. As repetitive tasks were automated, participants described how their responsibilities evolved, from producing content to refining and evaluating it and from executing steps to managing AI inputs and outputs.

Several mentioned that their jobs now involve quality control of AI-generated material, designing effective prompts or translating AI suggestions into contextually appropriate outputs. This reflects a shift from purely doing tasks to owning and supervising them, introducing both new freedoms and new forms of accountability.

> "That gives me and I also think my colleagues more time to focus on strategic storytelling and actual creative thinking." (P13, Marketing Manager)

At the same time, this shift wasn't without challenges. A few participants noted a blurred sense of authorship and occasional uncertainty over when to trust the AI's output versus rely on

personal judgment. While this dynamic empowers employees to take initiative, it also places more weight on their critical thinking.

The integration of AI not only enabled employees to take more ownership of their tasks, but also redefined what it means to contribute meaningfully within a team. As AI handled more of the repetitive tasks, participants increasingly took on roles involving critical thinking and strategic input. This shift offered empowerment for many, but also introduced new responsibilities around judgment and role expectations.

Overall, AI tools appear to support greater independence at work, especially by helping junior employees initiate and complete tasks more confidently. Yet with this independence comes a transformation in role expectations, toward strategic thinking and oversight. These changes align directly with RQ1, suggesting that AI automation is not simply accelerating tasks but fundamentally reshaping how employees experience and define their professional autonomy.

4.4 Experiences with AI Integration

Participants had different experiences in terms of AI integration within their workplace. Particularly in relation to the training provided by their organizations, participants shared a range of experiences, from well-structured onboarding programs to informal, self-guided learning.

Some participants described receiving dedicated training through workshops or online demos. For these employees, training provided a structured path toward adoption.

> "We had optional training sessions, short tutorials, live demos, and Q&As. At first, some people were skeptical… but once they saw how much time it saved, they came around quickly" (P6, Product Manager).

> "There definitely was training provided and we had multiple workshops I think even mandatory workshops where these two tools were shown to us and we also had online training sessions" (P7, Associate Consultant)

> "For the AI scouting tool, we did receive training, even from the company that developed the tool." (P11, Startup Accelerator)

In contrast, several participants described learning through experimentation, peer support or trial and error. Therefore, a key finding across participants is the inconsistency in organizational support for AI adoption, particularly in the form of training. While some participants (P6, P7, P11 and P15) benefited from structured onboarding and tutorials, other participants (P5, P8, P13 & P15) described a much more informal, self-directed learning process. This disparity

highlights how organizational readiness and investment in AI training shape the employee experience.

> "..in general we follow a learning by doing approach where there's no formal training. It's not that we have AI class where someone is standing there teaching us stuff." (P8, Venture Capitalist)

> "I mostly learned by watching others and trying things out myself." (P5, Client Services)

Participants who favored this method often saw it as empowering, while others felt the absence of structure left gaps in understanding and confidence.

Another important theme that emerged beyond training was the role of trust in the tools themselves. All 15 participants noted that AI output should not be relied on blindly. In many cases, their confidence in the results depended on how well they understood the technology and whether they felt it was reliable enough to inform their work or influence decision-making. A lack of transparency or understanding often led to hesitation, prompting employees to double-check AI-generated content before using it.

> "I don't trust outputs blindly… especially for anything used in IC memos. Transparency is a bigger challenge. If you can't explain how you got an AI-generated insight, it definitely weakens your credibility."(P15, Investment Associate)

> "Trust in AI varies. In some areas, I feel confident relying on the output, but in others, like Excel Copilot, I haven't been fully convinced by the results I've seen yet."(P3, Portfolio Manager)

These reflections provided a broader understanding on the mixed experiences participants had in terms of AI integration in their workplace. This does not only link back to RQ3 in terms of employee expectations, but also to the overall central research question on what employees' experiences were in regard to the use of AI in their work environment.

4.5 Desires for Future AI Integration

Beyond their current experiences with AI, participants were also invited to share their thoughts on the future of AI in the workplace. These reflections were often marked by a blend of optimism and caution, revealing not only what participants anticipate from future developments, but also what they believe must improve. This theme captures their expectations and desires, both practical and aspirational, for how AI can better support human work moving forward.

Participants expressed a need for AI systems to become more trustworthy, transparent and secure. While enthusiasm about technological advancement was strong, it was often

accompanied by a desire for improvements in how AI systems are explained, validated and monitored. There was optimism about AI's potential, but the expressed need for improvement overall carried a lot of weight. For example, P7 highlighted concerns around trust and security, while remaining hopeful about where the technology is headed:

> "I would also say the security and trust of AI definitely needs to be improved, but I'm extremely excited to see what the next years of AI will hold." (P7, Associate Consultant)

There was also a widespread belief that companies should do more to support employee learning and provide guidance for responsible AI usage.

> "One thing I would emphasize is the importance of training when rolling out AI tools. If a company decides to implement them, they should invest in helping employees understand how to use them. Otherwise, people won't know how to use the tools effectively, and the benefits won't be fully realized."(P3, Portfolio Manager)

Some participants looked ahead to the potential for AI to become not just a tool of productivity, but one of creativity and collaboration. There was a shared sense of hope that future systems would be more emotionally intelligent, better integrated into workflows and designed to augment rather than replace human work.

> "Ideally, I'd like AI to be a partner, something that helps me brainstorm or structure ideas, not just finish tasks faster."(P13, Marketing Manager)

> "It should support us, not replace us. It needs to learn how we think, not the other way around."(P10, Corporate Lawyer)

Collectively, participants' desires for future AI integration reflect a balance between excitement and caution. They see AI as a powerful tool for boosting efficiency and decision-making, but they also want future systems to support collaboration, creativity and trust. Calls for more training, smarter integration and emotional intelligence in AI design were common. These insights suggest that the future of AI in organizations is not just about doing more, it's about doing better, with human values and long-term learning in mind.

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary of results

The study's findings show that AI-driven workflow automation has an extensive impact on employees' workplace experiences. Five primary themes emerged from the 15 interviews - operational efficiency, changing dynamics in workplace relationships, employee autonomy and role change, experiences with AI integration and desires for future AI integration.

Across roles and industries, participants reported that AI tools have significantly improved operational efficiency, particularly by automating repetitive tasks and freeing up time for more strategic or creative responsibilities. However, this benefit was often lost due to having the need to double-check AI-generated outputs. Many employees described spending additional time reviewing or editing content produced by AI, highlighting a tension between automation and accuracy. As a result, the efficiency gains were sometimes offset by the responsibility of ensuring content quality and accuracy with the AI-generated content.

Participants also described how AI has transformed workplace communication, shifting it from verbal interactions to more asynchronous and written exchanges. Tools such as chatbots, meeting assistants and other collaborative tools were considered useful for coordinating tasks and improving documentation. However, these tools often reduced the frequency of spontaneous interactions for some participants, making communication feel more structured. While some participants appreciated the clarity and traceability AI brought to communication, others noted that these changes have impacted informal exchange at the workplace.

A consistent theme was the shift in employee autonomy and roles, especially among junior roles. Participants explained that AI tools enabled them to take initiative, complete tasks with less oversight and expand their overall competence in completing certain tasks. In organizations with strong training and onboarding, employees reported feeling empowered and confident in using AI tools. In contrast, others described a learning-by-doing approach and whether this impacted their competence in task completion remains to be further explored.

Experiences with AI integration varied widely, especially in relation to training and support. A few participants received structured onboarding, whereas others were left without formal training and often relied on peer support or self-learning.

Looking ahead, participants expressed a mix of optimism and caution about AI's future in the workplace. While they were hopeful about the potential of more adaptive, transparent and emotionally intelligent systems, they also emphasized the importance of AI that enhances rather than replaces human judgment, collaboration and creativity.

5.2 Connection to the existing literature

The results of this study somehow support, challenge and extend the existing body of research on AI's role in the workplace, providing new insight into how employees experience its implementation in their day-to-day work lives. This section is organized by the five major themes identified in the findings, drawing connections to relevant literature and highlighting areas of agreement, disagreement and contribution.

All participants reported that AI improves operational efficiency, particularly by automating routine tasks. This finding supports the observations of Benbya et al. (2020) and Shamim et al. (2022), who describe AI as a driver of organizational performance and change in managerial coordination. However, this study also revealed that efficiency gains are frequently lost by the need to verify AI output. This need of double-checking AI output can be linked with critical thinking and exercising judgement, which in turn challenges Mikalef et al.'s (2023) conclusion that although AI enhances automation and insight, it often does not support cognitive engagement, suggesting there is a loss in work investment when using AI.

AI's influence on communication aligns with Zimmerman et al. (2024), who emphasized that human-like AI tools can shift workplace interactions, particularly by reducing informal exchanges. Whereas Florea and Croitoru (2025) and Patil (2024) emphasized AIs potential of enabling clearer interactions, Gabelaia et al. (2024) stressed challenges such as misunderstandings and weakened interpersonal connection. Participants' observations on meeting assistants and summarization tools encouraging more written and asynchronous communication, reinforce this. Moreover, the emotional ambivalence expressed by participants toward these changes connects to Tortorella et al. (2024), who found mixed outcomes for engagement in AI-automated environments.

The theme of autonomy, especially among junior staff, strongly supports Sowa et al. (2021), who argue that AI facilitates independent work when it aligns with task complexity and user roles. The finding that AI fosters initiative and confidence also resonates with Jarrahi (2018)

and Seeber (2020), who emphasized human-AI symbiosis in decision-making and quicker task accomplishment. However, the findings contradict with Mirbabaie et al. (2021), which introduced the concept of "AI identity threat", showing that when AI tools significantly alter job roles or are implemented without transparency, they can reduce perceived control and threaten employees' professional identity. This did not seem to be the case among the participants.

The differences in training and onboarding experienced among participants reflects implementation concerns raised by Olan et al. (2022), who advocate for coupling AI tools with robust knowledge-sharing systems. Where participants lacked formal guidance, trust in AI tools diminished, aligning with La Torre et al. (2021), who point to self-efficacy and source credibility as key determinants of AI acceptance. This underscores the importance of organizational readiness and training in shaping user engagement and trust.

When it came to AI training, participants' experiences varied widely. Some described detailed onboarding processes, while others learned on the go. These findings suggest that the technical rollout of AI tools is only part of the picture and how organizations prepare and support employees plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and outcomes.

Participants also shared their expectations about how AI should develop in the future. Many spoke about the importance of trust, transparency and emotional intelligence in AI systems. These reflections connect to Koenig's (2025) model of AI acceptance, which includes personal usability, delegation concerns and broader societal expectations and Park's (2024) scale dimensions on perceived utility and job security. This reinforces the idea that AI shapes not only what employees do but also how they feel about their work.

Employees were not just evaluating AI based on current performance, they were imagining how it should evolve to align with their workplace values. Concerns about fairness and autonomy were particularly relevant, reflecting Prunkl (2024) and Fossa's (2025) warnings about algorithmic micro-domination and the importance of user control. These perspectives also reinforce Schuetz and Venkatesh's (2020) call for emotionally aware and context-sensitive AI tools. In short, participants see AI not as a tool for tasks, but as a tool for collaboration that needs to grow in emotional and ethical ways for better workplace integration.

5.3 Implications

This study contributes to the growing literature on AI automation in the workplace in shifting the focus from AI tool functionality to employee experience with AI. While much of the existing research centers on the technical capabilities or adoption of specific AI systems, this study extends that work by examining how diverse AI tools affect everyday behaviors, perceptions and relationships at work across industries. In doing so, it broadens the scope of AI research to include sociocultural and emotional dimensions that have received limited attention. Specifically, the findings advance and to some extent challenge existing theoretical understanding of autonomy and communication in AI-automated work environments. Insights, such as on the coexistence of increased independence and responsibility, especially among junior roles or the shift from spontaneous verbal interactions to more structured written exchanges, challenge assumptions that AI either enhances or undermines human agency. Instead, the study suggests a need for more dynamic, human-centered frameworks that account for how AI tools reshape workplace interactions, emotional dynamics and perceptions of professionals. These contributions lay important groundwork for future research that seeks to build theory around the human experience with AI in organizational settings.

From a managerial standpoint, findings on sustainable and human-centered AI integration, recommend that organizations should consider and treat AI as a collaborative enhancement rather than a replacement for human input. Future AI implementation strategies must prioritize employee training, not just in technical use, but in developing critical judgment and promoting a new layer of responsibility when working alongside AI. Organizations should try to keep space for informal and personal connections, even as AI tools continue to streamline communication. When choosing AI tools, it’s important to consider tools that truly support employees, tools that are clear about how they work, feel secure to use and can easily be integrated into employees’ workflows.

5.4 Limitations & future studies

Despite generating valuable insights, this study comes with some limitations. First, the data is based on a small interview sample of 15 participants from various industries. While this diversity was intentional in order to enrich the findings by capturing a broad range of perspectives form different industries and job roles, it also means that experiences with AI

varied considerably depending on the participant's role, their sector of work and the maturity of AI adoption within their organization or even industry. This variation limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population.

Another potential limitation is the diversity of AI tools used by participants. However, this variation was intentional as well, aiming to capture a realistic picture of AI integration across different workflows and organizational contexts. Some participants primarily used generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, extensively, while others primarily relied or elaborated on AI-powered project management platforms or meeting assistants. Apart from generative AI, specifically chatbots, there was not a single tool was consistently used across all participants. While this initial approach adds depth to the study, it also introduces variability that may make comparisons between participants less precise.

Additionally, the study fully relied on qualitative data from structured interviews. While this method allowed for rich, context-specific insights, it did not include standardized or quantitative measures for constructs such as trust or communication quality. Incorporating such additional measures in future studies could improve the ability to compare findings across cases or validate themes in larger samples. For example, a multiple-selection survey could measure employee experiences with AI using variables such as the usefulness perceived by employees, their communication changes and different individual autonomy levels. This would not only lead to a larger sample size but could also challenge the themes that have been generated in this study.

Future research should explore how employee relationships with AI evolve over time, particularly as technologies become even more advanced in daily work. Cross-cultural studies would also be valuable, as communication styles and organizational norms can differ widely across cultural contexts (Sahadevan & Sumangala, 2021). In addition, more research is needed on how AI reshapes not just tasks, but the social dynamics of work. As AI becomes increasingly integrated in the workplace, further understanding on its long-term impact on team collaboration and organizational culture will be crucial.

6 Conclusion

When considering the main contribution of this research, it is important to consider not only the findings of this study, but also prior research that has been done in the field. In regard to this study, the focus has been in shifting from the functionality of AI systems to the human experience of working with them. While much of the existing research focuses on performance measures and automation outcomes, this study looks at how AI influences employees experience autonomy, communication and their changes in the overall work dimension.

The results show that AI's real value isn't in replacing people, but in changing the way they think about, handle and make sense of their work. It's less about doing things faster and more about doing things differently and sustainably. For AI to genuinely support the human side of work, it needs to be introduced in a thoughtful way, whether that's through proper training, careful integration or an organizational culture that embraces and most importantly supports its use. As this technology advances, organizations must make sure that employees stay empowered, supported and at the heart of how work gets done in a cooperative setting.

7 References

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8 Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Script

Name of Interviewer: _____

Interviewee No.: _____

Date/Time of Interview: _____

Transcription Date: _____

Introduction

"Hello and thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. My name is Linus Kuhlmann and I am conducting this research as part of my Master thesis at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics.

This interview is part of a research project that aims to explore the effects of AI automation tools on workplace collaboration, with a particular focus on team dynamics, communication and social connectivity. The goal is to better understand how AI is shaping workplace interactions and to gather insights from professionals like yourself who actively engage with these technologies.

Before we begin, I want to assure you that your participation is completely voluntary. Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous, meaning your name and any identifying details will not be included in the final research findings. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or wish to skip a question, you are free to do so. Additionally, you can withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview for transcription and analysis purposes. The recording will be securely stored and only used for research purposes. Before we proceed, could you please confirm that you have read and signed the informed consent form and that you agree to this interview being recorded?"

A) Participant Profile

- What is your current role, industry and years of experience in the field?

- How would you describe the structure of your team? (Team size, hierarchy levels, remote/in-office setup).

- How does communication and teamwork typically function within your company?

- Do you use any particular methodology to manage communication and/or teamwork?

- What are your preferred communication channels (Slack, Teams, email, face-to-face)? Are there specific features or reasons why you use these channels instead of others?

- What is the frequency of internal team meetings or check-ins per week/month? And do you feel that these meetings are productive, or would you prefer a different approach? Why?

B) AI Tools Integrated into Daily Workflow

- What AI automation tools do you currently use in your daily work? And why specifically these tools?

- How frequently do you use these tools? Daily, weekly, occasionally?

- For what specific tasks do you use these tools? What specific differences do you notice between working with these tools and without them?

- How do AI tools interact with your team's workflows? Do you use them collaboratively (e.g., team dashboards, shared AI assistants)? Are they mainly used for personal efficiency and individual tasks?

- Have AI tools changed the way you manage your team (e.g., in the way you distribute tasks)? Are certain responsibilities shifting? Has AI freed up time for other types of work?

C) Perception of AI Automation Tools

- What is your general opinion on AI automation tools in the workplace? Have they been useful? Why or why not? Do you perceive them as helpful or a potential challenge?

-To what extent has your organization introduced AI automation? How? Was training provided? Was there resistance or enthusiasm among employees?

- What are the main benefits you associate with AI automation tools? In terms of efficiency? Workload? Decision-making?

- What are some concerns or challenges you see with AI in workplace settings? Could you elaborate? Perhaps on Job security? Trust in AI-generated decisions? Impact on creativity and innovation?

D) Perceived Impact on Workplace Collaboration

- How do AI tools impact communication within your team? Would you say AI has influenced how often you communicate with colleagues? Has it changed the medium of communication (more written vs. spoken communication)?

- How do AI automation tools affect teamwork and collaboration? Do they improve or hinder collaboration? Have there been any noticeable changes in team dynamics?

- Have you observed any shift in decision-making processes due to AI automation? Are decisions being made more quickly or slowly? Are AI recommendations trusted or do you double-check them?

- Have AI tools influenced your workplace relationships and team culture? Do they reduce or increase human interaction? Do they reduce or increase autonomy in work?

- If you were to describe the biggest change AI automation has brought to your work, what would it be? Positive or negative? Would you like to see AI more deeply integrated or used less after all the experiences you have made with these tools so far?

Additional/Closing Question

- Is there anything else you'd like to add about AI's impact on workplace collaboration you are experiencing or have experienced in the past?

Debriefing

This study aims to explore both the benefits and challenges of AI automation, particularly in how it affects the way teams work together, share information and maintain social connectivity. By analyzing your responses, we hope to provide meaningful insights into how organizations can better integrate AI while fostering a productive and collaborative work environment. If you have any questions about the study, or if you would like to receive a summary of the research findings, please feel free to contact me.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Thank you for considering participating in this study. I, Linus Kuhlmann, am conducting this experiment as part of my Master Thesis at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics, under the supervision of Prof. *Cristina Mendonça*.

The purpose is to understand how AI-driven automation influences team dynamics, communication and workplace collaboration across different roles and industries. Your participation will contribute to research on creativity.

The study consists of a structured interview. It will last around 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

Please answer as honestly as possible. All answers will be kept strictly confidentially and are anonymous. This means that it will not be possible to link your responses to your identity. The data collected will be used for research purposes only and may be presented in my thesis or disseminated in academic journals, always in an aggregated form, never about any individual response.

There are no expected side effects of participating in this study. You may change your mind and drop out at any point of the study during its completion.

If you have any questions about this study, please email *Linus Kuhlmann* (*s-lkuhlmann@ucp.pt*).

Do you consent to take part in this interview? Yes | No

Do you consent to the recording of this interview? Yes | No

Signature

_____

Interviewee

Appendix C

Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote	Participant
Operational Efficiency	Faster workflows	The number one benefit is definitely time savings. But also, clarity... especially when deadlines are tight	P6
Operational Efficiency	Faster workflows	Collaboration is more efficient now... we can focus more on brainstorming or strategic work	P4
Operational Efficiency	Faster workflows	ChatGPT... helps present the argument in a more structured way	P2
Operational Efficiency	Double-checking AI output	Sometimes the tools reduce workload... but other times they can create extra work	P11
Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions	Asynchronous exchange	There's been a huge shift toward more written communication	P7
Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions	AI-mediated collaboration	AI note-taking... reduced the need for follow-up conversations	P11

Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions	Asynchronous exchange	We rely more on written updates and AI-generated summaries	P11
Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions	Less informal communication	AI hasn't really changed our communication patterns... we prioritize face-to-face	P4
Shifting Dynamics in Workplace Interactions	Less informal communication	We still talk in person or use Teams for quick updates	P2
Employee Autonomy and Role Change	Strategic role shifts	People are able to move more autonomously, especially juniors	P6
Employee Autonomy and Role Change	Strategic role shifts	Juniors can now pull together preliminary analyses or decks	P15
Employee Autonomy and Role Change	Change in responsibilities	It allows me to work efficiently even when I'm not an expert	P4
Employee Autonomy and Role Change	Change in responsibilities	That gives me and I also think my colleagues more time for strategic storytelling	P13
Experiences with AI Integration	Training provided	We had optional training sessions, short tutorials...	P6

Experiences with AI Integration	Training provided	There definitely was training provided and we had multiple workshops	P7
Experiences with AI Integration	Training provided	We did receive training, even from the company that developed the tool	P11
Experiences with AI Integration	Self-exploration	We follow a learning-by-doing approach... no formal training	P8
Experiences with AI Integration	Self-exploration	I mostly learned by watching others and trying things out myself	P5
Experiences with AI Integration	Trust & skepticism	I don’t trust outputs blindly... transparency is a bigger challenge	P15
Experiences with AI Integration	Trust & skepticism	Trust in AI varies... I haven’t been fully convinced	P3
Desires for Future AI Integration	Trust & security	Security and trust of AI definitely needs to be improved... excited to see what's next	P7
Desires for Future AI Integration	Smarter AI systems	Importance of training when rolling out AI tools	P3

Desires for Future AI Integration	Desire for meaningful integration	Ideally, I'd like AI to be a partner—something that helps me brainstorm	P13
Desires for Future AI Integration	Desire for meaningful integration	It should support us, not replace us... learn how we think	P10