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COMMENTARY

Covarrubias: The Augmentation Gap: What 2 Million AI Conversations Reveal About the Future of Work

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Dr. Daniel Covarrubias, director of the Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development. (Photo courtesy: TAMIU)

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By Dr. Daniel Covarrubias

A customs broker in South Texas is staring at a screen. She has 47 shipments to classify before noon, each one requiring documentation review, tariff code verification, and compliance checks against three different regulatory databases. It's 8:15 a.m. She pulls up an AI tool, feeds it the commercial invoices, and watches it sort the straightforward shipments from the ones that need her judgment. By 9:30, she's done with classification. The rest of her morning goes to a call with an importer navigating a new tariff ruling, the kind of conversation that requires 20 years of experience and a sense for which questions the client doesn't know to ask.

She did not lose her job. She got more of it back.

That interaction, a human and a machine splitting the work along the line where judgment begins, represents one way AI is reshaping work. It's not the only version. But according to the largest dataset we have on actual AI use, it's the most common one.

What the Data Actually Says

Anthropic, the AI company behind Claude, released its fourth Economic Index report this month, built from analysis of 2 million real conversations. The headlines were predictable. One outlet warned of a possible 'Great Recession for white-collar workers.' Others ran the job exposure numbers. The usual cycle followed.

The finding that mattered most was quieter.

Of all the ways people use AI at work, 52% involve augmentation: humans working alongside the tool, making decisions together, with the person retaining final judgment. Automation, where the AI handles a task entirely, accounts for 45%. The remaining 3% is somewhere in between.

Augmentation is winning, at least for now. The most common use of AI is not replacing people. It is a person and a machine collaborating on something neither could do as well alone.

The Gap That Matters

The report maps two things across 800 occupations. First, what AI could theoretically do. Second, what it's actually doing. The distance between those two numbers is significant.

In the fields of computer science and mathematics, AI could theoretically handle 94% of tasks. It's currently covering 33%. In business and finance, the theoretical number is also 94%. Actual adoption sits around 20%. Office and administrative roles: 90% theoretical, 25% real.

The gap is narrowing, but slowly. In January 2025, 36% of occupations had AI touching at least a quarter of their tasks. By November, that number reached 49%. That is real movement. But when you measure what AI is actually completing successfully, the spread is still wide.

Researchers call this the adoption gap. I think about it differently. That gap is a strategy question.

Every organization sitting on a 60- to 70-percentage-point spread between what is possible and what they're doing is not facing a technology problem. The tools exist. The question is whether the organization has a plan for using them.

What This Looks Like in Practice

The customs broker example is not hypothetical. Variations of that scene play out across industries every day, in the organizations that have figured this out.

A regional healthcare system managing patient scheduling across 12 clinics. Staff spend hours on phone calls, insurance verification, and rescheduling. AI handles the scheduling logic, the verification steps, and the follow-up reminders. The staff redirects their time to patients who need human attention: the elderly person confused about medication changes, the new mother with questions that don't fit a dropdown menu.

A mid-size accounting firm during tax season. Junior associates spend weeks pulling data from client documents, cross-referencing figures, and populating forms. AI handles extraction and cross-referencing. The associates review output, catch edge cases, and shift to advisory work: helping clients understand what the numbers mean and what decisions to make next. The firm bills more advisory hours. The associates develop judgment faster because they're practicing it rather than copying data between spreadsheets.

A small law firm preparing for a commercial litigation case. Two paralegals spend a week reviewing 4,000 documents for relevance, flagging key clauses, and organizing exhibits. AI handles the initial review and sorting. The paralegals finish in two days, then spend the rest of the week on the work the attorneys actually need: building the timeline of events, identifying contradictions across depositions, and preparing the trial binder with the judgment calls that win cases.

In each case, the team doesn't shrink. What the team does changes.

The Complexity Surprise

One finding in the report challenged my own assumptions.

AI doesn't just speed up simple tasks. It speeds up complex ones faster.

Tasks requiring a college-level education were completed 12 times faster with AI assistance. Tasks requiring a high school education were completed 9 times faster. The more complex the work, the greater the time savings.

The popular version of the AI story assumes machines handle the simple stuff while humans handle the hard stuff. The data says something more interesting: AI's biggest productivity impact is on the work that requires the most training and expertise to do manually.

There's a deeper point here that goes beyond productivity metrics. For decades, organizations have treated expertise as scarce and rationed it accordingly. The senior analyst builds one financial model because that's all they have time for. The logistics coordinator maps one set of routing scenarios because the alternatives take too long to evaluate. AI doesn't replace the expertise. It removes the bottleneck that kept expertise from being fully deployed. The analyst builds five models and spends their remaining time interpreting them. The coordinator evaluates 30 routing options in the time it used to take to evaluate three.

The constraint on expert impact was never knowledge. It was time. AI compresses the time. The expert, finally, operates at full capacity.

The Deskilling Risk, and How to Think About It

The report flags a risk worth taking seriously. If AI handles the complex components of a job, the remaining work shifts toward lower-skill tasks. The researchers use travel agents as an example: if AI handles complex itinerary planning, the human role shrinks to routine ticket purchasing and payment processing. The job gets simpler. The person becomes less valuable.

That's a real concern. But the deskilling scenario assumes a passive response, one where AI reshapes job content by default rather than by design.

The alternative is deliberate. If AI compresses the preparation phase of expert work, redirect that time toward the work that benefits most from a human in the room: building relationships, reading clients, and understanding context that doesn't fit in a dataset.

The customs broker who no longer spends six hours on paperwork visits clients, maps their supply chains, and anticipates regulatory shifts before they arrive.

Deskilling is the default outcome. Reskilling is the intentional one.

The Productivity Signal

The Anthropic report estimates that widespread AI adoption could increase U.S. labor productivity growth by 1 to 1.8 percentage points per year over the next decade. Even the conservative end of that range would return productivity growth to rates the country hasn't seen since the late 1990s.

The U.S. has averaged about 1.4% annual productivity growth over the past two decades. Adding a full percentage point would be comparable to the surge that accompanied the personal computer and internet era.

But here's the qualifier the researchers are careful to include: those gains depend on adoption. The technology has to be used. Right now, AI use remains concentrated in a narrow band of occupations and tasks. The top 10 tasks account for 24% of all AI interactions, up from 21% at the start of 2025. Usage is getting more concentrated, not less.

The organizations capturing productivity gains are those that have moved beyond experimentation and built AI into their workflows. The rest are running pilots, attending webinars, and waiting.

What the Gap Costs

In business and finance occupations, the gap between theoretical AI capability (94%) and actual adoption (20%) represents thousands of hours per year per organization spent on tasks that a machine could handle in minutes.

Those hours show up as slower response times, delayed reporting, and missed patterns in data. But the real cost is subtler. It's talented people spending their days on work that doesn't require their talent. It's an organization that hired smart people and then buried them in process.

And yes, some organizations will look at that gap and see a headcount decision. That's the blunt version of closing it. The data doesn't pretend otherwise. But the organizations getting the most from AI aren't the ones cutting teams. They're the ones redeploying them.

The organizations that close the gap first won't do it by buying more software. They'll do it by rethinking how work gets done: which tasks belong to humans, which belong to machines, and how the two interact at every step.

The Real Question

Every technology transition eventually comes down to the same fork in the road. One path is reactive: wait for the technology to reshape your organization and deal with the consequences. The other is intentional: decide what you want your associates to do, and start building toward it.

The Anthropic data gives us something rare in the AI conversation: real evidence, drawn from millions of actual interactions, about how this technology is being used right now. The picture is complicated, but clearer than the headlines suggest. 52% augmentation. Complexity is being compressed, not eliminated. And a gap that tells us more about organizational readiness than about the technology itself.

But those findings describe the organizations that are paying attention. The gap between what's possible and what's happening is still enormous, even as it slowly narrows. Closing it isn't a technology project. It's an act of institutional imagination: looking at every workflow, every role, every process, and asking whether your people are spending their time on the work that actually requires them.

The tools are ready. The organizations that move first will be the ones that treat this as a design problem, not a technology problem.

Editor's Note: The above commentary was provided by Dr. Daniel Covarrubias, Ph.D., director of the Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development at the A.R. Sanchez, Jr. School of Business at Texas A&M International University. His research focuses on cross-border trade, logistics, and the convergence of exponential technologies with North American economic integration. The commentary appears in the RGG Business Journal with the permission of the author.

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