

WHITE PAPER · INSIGHTSOUT RESEARCH

When Your Role Starts Changing

What people navigating AI-driven role change say about identity, fear, and what they want next

By Nima Imani · August 18, 2026 · 9 minute read

Version 1.0 n = 363 people 9 workshop waves March – July 2026

Summary

In July 2026 we ran two workshops called *When Your Role Starts Changing* — one online, one in person — for anyone whose work was shifting under them. They became the two largest rooms in our record, and they changed who was in the room: the share of founders fell by half, and individual contributors, executives, managers, and people describing themselves as "in transition" filled the difference. Together with the rest of our dataset, they give an unusually direct view of what role change feels like from the inside.

Four things stand out. AI adoption is the single most-named change people are navigating, and for more than one in five the place it lands is their identity or sense of value, not their workload. Fear is named roughly three times as often by individual contributors and people in transition as by founders. Almost nobody names a skill gap as their biggest pain, yet a map of what to build next is the number-one thing people want to leave with. And people want a practical next step and peer conversation in equal measure — provided the peer part does not feel like networking.

Where this comes from

I've been through role change more than once — teacher, then technologist and consultant, then coach — and I still notice that when my role shifts, the question underneath is not *what will I do* but *who am I if I'm not doing that*. So when I read the registration answers for the role-change workshops, I was reading for that question. It was there, in people's own words, before anyone had asked it directly.

Everything here comes from optional questions people answered when they registered. The full method and limits are on the [methodology](#) page and at the end of this paper. Numbers are read live from our findings ledger and will move as new waves land; the version above tells you which edition you are reading.

1. The change is AI, and it lands on identity

76 of 163

top 'kind of change', ROLE form · n=163

AI adoption is the single most-named kind of change people are navigating.

36 of 163

'my identity or sense of value', ROLE form · n=163

Asked where the change is felt most, more than one in five people navigating role change point to their identity or sense of value — not their workload.

Confirms [SHRM, Navigating AI in the Workplace 2026](#) — 27% of early-career workers fear AI will devalue their field; 45% of workers overall expect to reskill.

We asked what kind of change people were navigating and where they felt it most. AI adoption was the top answer to the first question by a wide margin. And when asked where the change was felt, thirty-six of 163 people pointed not to their tasks or their hours but to their identity or sense of value.

"Will my role even exist in the future." — Coach / consultant

"How to navigate in a new AI-embedded economy as a visionary explorer of my next chapter in life." — Founder

"Mental block trouble stepping up to CEO role." — In career transition

Founders and employees frame this differently and I think both framings are honest. Founders ask *what is my role when AI does the building*. Employees ask *will my job exist*. Underneath both is the same thing: roles are tied to identity, and when the role moves, it can feel like grief, threat, possibility, and freedom at the same time. SHRM's 2026 report found about a quarter of early-career workers fear AI will devalue their field, and nearly

half of all workers expect to reskill. Our numbers are smaller and self-selected, but the shape is the same.

2. Uncertainty is close to universal for people in transition

83%

of 23 self-described in-transition respondents; managers 62%, startup operators 63%, founders 45% · n=23

Among people who describe themselves as in career or role transition, uncertainty about direction is close to universal.

Confirms [Anthropic, What 81,000 people told us about the economics of AI \(Apr 2026\)](#) — Early-career workers report substantially higher displacement concern than senior professionals.

Across the whole dataset, "uncertainty or lack of clarity about direction" is the most common hardest-thing, named by about half of everyone. Among the people who described themselves as exploring a career or role transition, it is named by more than four in five. That is a small group — twenty-three people — so I hold the exact figure lightly. But the direction is unmistakable, and it matches what Anthropic found in its 81,000-person study: concern is highest where role security is lowest.

What I noticed in the free text is that this uncertainty is not vague. It is specific and unresolved.

"Navigating career uncertainty. I'm looking for a new job, and that has been kinda wearing away at my self confidence." — Product / engineering IC

"Ideation Stage — trying to figure out on what I should concentrate the next years of my life. I have a couple of directions and ideas but haven't figured out which one to choose or how to prioritize them yet." — Builder

There is a body to this too — the confidence wearing away, the block that stops someone stepping into a role they have already been offered. People are describing a decision they cannot make and a self they are not sure of. Both at once.

3. Who names fear — and who doesn't

33-39% vs 11%

product/eng ICs 33% (n=21), in transition 39% (n=23), founders 11% (n=141);
on the identical ROLE form: 32% non-founders vs 27% founders · n=185

Fear or anxiety about the change is named roughly three times as often by individual contributors and people in transition as by founders.

Confirms [Anthropic, What 81,000 people told us about the economics of AI \(Apr 2026\)](#) — Displacement concern is highest where role security is lowest.

Fear or anxiety about the change was named by a third of individual contributors and nearly four in ten people in transition — and by about one founder in nine. Even on the identical form, where the comparison is clean, non-founders name it a little more often than founders, and they name lack of trust and lack of clarity two to four times as often.

I don't know from this data whether founders feel fear less or report it less. I suspect the second, at least partly; I've sat with enough founders to know the fear is there. But the design implication is the same either way. If you are trying to reach people whose roles are changing, lead with the words

they use — uncertainty, clarity, what's next — and let fear be named in the room rather than on the poster. And if you lead a team, assume the fear is roughly three times more present than you hear about. The people who feel it most are the least likely to say it to the person who decides their future.

4. People want a map, not a course

62 of 163

#1 desired outcome, ROLE form; skill gap named as a pain by only 9% across the dataset · n=163

A map of what skills or capacities to build next is the #1 thing people navigating role change want to leave with — even though almost nobody names a skill gap as their biggest pain.

Complicates [SHRM, Navigating AI in the Workplace 2026](#) — The field talks about reskilling as courses; people ask for a map, not a curriculum.

This one surprised me. Almost nobody — nine percent across the dataset — named a skill gap as their biggest challenge. Yet "a sense of what skills or capacities to build next" was the single most-wanted outcome for people navigating role change: sixty-two of 163.

The field talks about reskilling as courses. People are asking for something smaller and harder: orientation. *Given who I am and what is changing around me, what are the two or three capacities my role needs next?* That is a map, not a curriculum. It is closer to a coaching conversation than a learning platform. And it is what people say they would walk out with if the session gave them exactly what they needed.

"Adopting and blending new skills (AI) into existing workflow." — Registrant, free text

"How I, with my tools and expertise, ease the transition to the new world for people who feel lost, frustrated, anxious." — Coach / consultant

5. A practical next step and people to think with

53 and 52 of 163

'a practical next step' 53, 'peer conversations with others navigating change' 52, 'practical decision-making tools' 37 · n=163

People want a practical next step and peer conversation in almost equal measure — and say the peer part must not feel like networking.

Asked what support would help, "a practical next step" and "peer conversations with others navigating change" came out almost tied at the top, with practical decision-making tools close behind. The free text added a condition: not networking. "A less performative setting." Space to process with people who are in it too.

I've been noticing that these two asks are usually treated as different products — a workshop for the practical part, a community for the peer part. In our data they are the same request. People want to leave with one concrete thing to try, and they want to have arrived at it with others rather than alone. The change becomes bearable when it is witnessed, and it becomes actionable when it is small.

6. What this suggests, for you and for anyone designing for you

If your role is changing: the question you can't answer is probably not a knowledge question. It is a direction question and an identity question wearing a knowledge costume. A map of two or three capacities beats a list of courses. And the fear you may not be saying out loud is, in our data, the most common thing in the room.

If you design programs, workshops, or support for people in this situation: hold both emotions in the copy — excited *and* uncertain — because that is what people are actually carrying. Lead with uncertainty and clarity, not fear. Build a structured, explicitly non-performative peer component and say so on the listing. And end with a map, not a syllabus.

I'm still working out what the best form of that map is. That is one of the things the next waves are for.

7. Limits, and what we will measure next

These are registration-time answers from a self-selected audience, mostly in and around San Francisco. The strongest numbers here come from a single form used at two events ($n=163$) — that is what makes the founder-versus-everyone comparisons clean, and it is also why they need a second wave before they carry more weight. Small segments (people in transition, individual contributors, managers) are reported at the segment threshold, not as headline claims. Cross-event counts use a conservative theme mapping described in the methodology.

Next: the same five core questions on every event so waves compare directly; an explicit career-stage question, so we can test whether the identity concern concentrates in early-career people the way Anthropic and

SHRM suggest; and a post-event pulse to see what shifts — whether people leave with the map they came for.

Cite as

Imani, N. (2026). *When Your Role Starts Changing: what people navigating AI-driven role change say about identity, fear, and what they want next* (v1.0). InsightsOut. <https://insightsout.work/research/when-your-role-starts-changing.html>

Sources

- SHRM — Navigating AI in the Workplace, 2026
- Anthropic — What 81,000 people told us about the economics of AI (April 2026)
- InsightsOut — Workshop Questionnaire Themed Findings, August 2026 (internal; aggregated and anonymized)
- Companion paper: [Working Through AI Change](#) — the leadership and organizational side of the same dataset

What changed

- v1.0 · August 2026 · First edition. Draws mainly on the two 'When Your Role Starts Changing' waves (n=163) inside the 9-wave, 363-person dataset, March–July 2026.

This is a living paper. Numbers on this page are read from the InsightsOut findings ledger and reflect the dataset version shown above. Older PDF editions remain available.

Limits

Registration-time answers (needs and intent, not outcomes); self-selected, San Francisco / startup-ecosystem heavy; questionnaire varied by event so cross-event counts use a conservative theme mapping; role not captured at OTF and FIC.