

AI Is Reshaping the First Rung of the Leadership Ladder: The Unintended Consequences

AI is eliminating many of the administrative roles that have traditionally given women their first foothold in the workforce and a pathway into leadership. Organizations must redesign those early-career opportunities, or risk narrowing the pipeline of future women leaders.

By Lara Blackert

The discussion about AI and gender often begins with the jobs women hold today. The longer-term question is how automation may change access to the experiences from which future leaders emerge.

Clerical and administrative work is among the occupational groups most exposed to generative AI. These roles are disproportionately held by women. They have also historically served as important entry points into organizations, providing income, experience, relationships, and pathways into professional and leadership careers.

If organizations automate these roles without redesigning the pathways they once provided, the effect will extend well beyond near-term job displacement. It may narrow the pipeline of women who gain access to the experiences from which future leaders emerge.

Entry-level work is more than a collection of tasks

Administrative roles are often evaluated through their visible outputs: scheduling, coordination, correspondence, records, transactions, and routine analysis. Because many of these tasks can be automated, the role itself can appear expendable.

Jobs also perform developmental functions that task inventories do not capture. They teach how decisions are made, expose employees to customers and operating rhythms, create professional networks, and provide opportunities to demonstrate judgement before someone holds a title that formally requires it.

Many careers begin with work that looks modest on an organization chart. The individual learns the system, becomes trusted, takes on more complex responsibility, and moves into a role that would not have been accessible from outside.

When the entry role disappears, the pathway can disappear with it.

Exposure is uneven

The International Labour Organization's refined global index found that women's employment is more highly exposed to generative AI, particularly in high-income economies. The ILO also emphasizes that transformation is more likely than complete job automation across much of the labor market.

Organizations therefore retain meaningful choices about how exposed work is redesigned.

They can remove roles as tasks decline. Or they can redesign the role around coordination, customer judgement, workflow improvement, data quality, technology oversight, and the interpersonal work that becomes more important as routine production is automated.

The first path captures efficiency. The second preserves access while preparing people for a different operating environment.

A pipeline problem can remain invisible for years

Leadership pipelines are lagging indicators. If entry-level opportunities contract today, the effect on management representation may not become visible for a decade.

By then, organizations may attribute the shortage to a lack of qualified candidates. The more accurate explanation may be that fewer people received the early experiences required to qualify.

This is especially consequential for women, people without elite educational credentials, career returners, and workers who rely on internal mobility to access professional roles. Removing entry points can make organizations more dependent on external hiring from already advantaged networks.

Redesign the pathway, not only the work

Every AI workforce plan should ask three questions.

Leaders should identify the developmental value the existing role provided beyond its tasks, the populations that relied on it as an entry point, and the new role, apprenticeship, rotation, or credential that will provide a credible path into the organization after automation.

The answer may involve redesigned coordinator roles, AI operations apprenticeships, internal academies, paid rotations, skills-based hiring, or clearer movement from frontline positions into professional work. The mechanism will differ by organization. The strategic requirement remains.

Efficiency and access should be evaluated within the same workforce plan.

The leadership decision

Organizations are making decisions today that will shape who is eligible to lead in the future. That consequence belongs in the business case.

AI can remove administrative burden and expand human contribution. It can also reinforce inequality if organizations eliminate the lowest rung of the ladder while assuming people will somehow reach the next one.

The future leadership pipeline will not sustain itself. Organizations that automate established entry points must intentionally build credible new ones.

Sources

International Labour Organization, [Generative AI and Jobs: A Refined Global Index of Occupational Exposure](#), 2025, and [Gen AI, Occupational Segregation and Gender Equality in the World of Work](#), 2026.