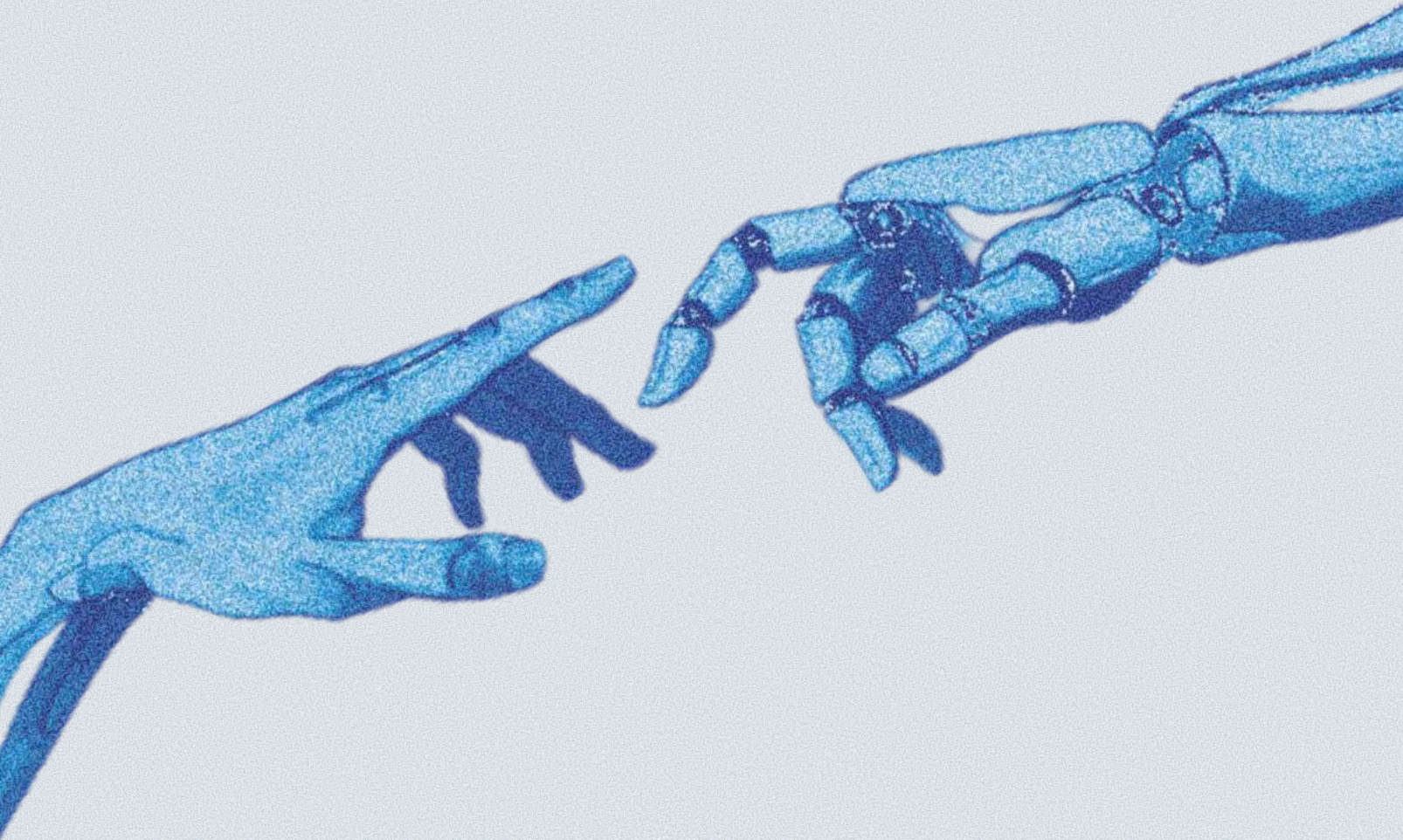




Building the Talent Advantage in an AI- Driven Economy

GFCC 2026 CALL TO ACTION

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Introduction

Every year, our Call to Action reflects what our global community identifies as the most urgent lever for competitiveness. In 2025's Call to Action, "Advancing Competitiveness in a Turbulent and Fast-Changing World," one recommendation rose above the rest: *Unlock human potential by building talent at scale.*

The GFCC community was adamant: talent is "the cornerstone of national competitiveness." Yet, billions of people lack the skills to contribute to the innovation economy and thrive. The GFCC leadership therefore put forward a recommendation for developing talent at global scale: AI and other technologies shaping the next economy must become foundational tools for learning, and fluency in these technologies must become a core competency for every job of the future.

To add specificity to this recommendation, we surveyed leaders across 32 countries – spanning government, industry, academia, and civil society – on how humans and AI can co-evolve to drive inclusive prosperity. The result, *The Human Edge: Global Perspectives on AI and Prosperity.*

This year's Call to Action is a direct build on 2025's focus on developing the workforce of the future. Tested against our global survey and refined through direct community feedback, last year's recommendation evolved into a sharper, more specific set of actionable recommendations.

The GFCC's 2026 Call to Action focuses on building the human edge by reshaping how education systems, businesses, universities, and governments develop talent, imbue people with the resilience to navigate disruption, and earn the trust of the very talent pipeline they seek to build.

The goal of the ten actions that follow is to design the systems — educational, organizational, and economic — in which human capability and AI capability compound each other. No single institution can deliver this alone. Competitive advantage in the years ahead will come from how effectively governments, universities, or companies work as a system.

Build talent, starting with those furthest behind

01

The World Bank's Human Capital Index projects that 56 percent of the world's children will lose more than half of their potential lifetime earnings because of inadequate healthcare and education. With 1.2 billion young people in the Global South alone expected to reach working age over the next decade, AI could help close this gap faster than any technology before it. But without deliberate action, the rise of the AI-driven economy could just as easily deepen the chasm.

Our research found that AI adoption is only moderately inclusive, putting the most disadvantaged at risk of falling even further behind. Closing that gap means deploying AI deliberately to personalize learning, and to extend expert-level capability to people and small teams who never had access to it before. Countries and institutions should invest in AI tutoring and digital-literacy programs that reach underserved schools and communities, alongside blended AI-and-mentorship platforms that extend expert instruction to regions with few qualified educators.

Programs like these are already running from Brazil to Romania — the task now is funding and replicating them at the scale challenge demands and not waiting for a new model to be invented.

Rebuild education systems around AI-era human capabilities

02

As AI increasingly supplies correct answers on demand, the skills that matter most shift from finding the right answer to framing the right question — and that shift needs to begin as early in a person's education as possible. An early gap only widens the longer it goes unaddressed. Current education and workforce systems are only somewhat or poorly preparing people for this transition, according to nine in ten survey respondents.

Our call is to fundamentally redesign education from K-12 through higher education around the capabilities that become more valuable as AI advances — rather than relying on incremental changes or bolting a digital-skills module onto existing curricula. We suggest focusing education on creativity, critical thinking, systems thinking, ethics, curiosity, and the judgment to apply technical tools well.

Humanities enrollment has declined across most OECD countries over the past decade, even as the capabilities these fields build — judgment, interpretation, ethical reasoning, etc. — grow in importance. Philosophy, history, literature, and ethics are the cognitive and moral infrastructure of human agency, developed alongside the rigor and evidence-based reasoning that mathematics, logic, and the sciences provide. AI literacy should be built on top of that foundation, strengthening human thinking rather than replacing one that is eroding.

Countries should update national curriculum standards on a fixed cycle to require these capabilities at all stages — developed jointly by ministries of education and education departments at schools, communities, school boards, universities, and employers. This curriculum update should be backed by fresh course materials and mandatory teacher training. In addition, the effects of this transition require a modernization of physical learning infrastructure: classrooms and lecture halls built for one-way instruction are poorly suited to the project-based, collaborative work AI-ready* education systems require.

***Definition: What we mean by “AI-ready”**

AI-ready describes people and organizations equipped to work with AI, not replaced by it. An AI-ready company does not automate its way to a smaller workforce but invests in employees' judgment, creativity, and skill so that people and AI generate more value together than either could alone. AI-ready talent is defined by the capacity to direct AI deliberately toward outcomes that matter, to work with and co-create alongside AI agents, and to keep growing as the technology does.

**Make lifelong learning
permanent infrastructure, not
crisis response**

03

Skills built once do not last a career. Yet, most reskilling functions today as a stopgap — a program launched after a role disappears. A better approach is to build reskilling infrastructure people can draw on continuously: portable learning accounts, stackable credentials, and employer co-investment that let people move from AI-exposed roles into AI-augmented ones before disruption forces the

choice. Governments, universities, and employers should treat lifelong learning the way they treat roads or power grids: a shared system sized for constant use and available to workers regardless of where they started.

Countries, regions, cities, and communities should make short training and apprenticeship opportunities widely available through flexible platforms that allow people to choose what they need, when they need it – and formally connect these opportunities to education and workforce systems. AI itself should power this infrastructure, helping people assess their skills, identify gaps and possible career pathways, find relevant programs, and accumulate portable credentials over time.

For all of this to work, people need to learn how to direct their own learning. That capacity has to be built starting early, not assumed as something people simply arrive with once accounts and platforms exist. Education reforms should treat the ability to learn as a skill explicitly taught, not a byproduct assumed to emerge on its own.

Invest in human agency and the skills that enable it

04

Most hiring, evaluation, and education systems still reward technical proficiency and correct answers, not judgment or original thinking. The human edge is real, but it will stay underdeveloped for as long as the systems that identify, train, and promote people are built to measure something else.

AI's capabilities are advancing quickly enough that no one can confidently say where the boundary between human and machine capability will sit even a few years from now — treating any specific skill as uniquely human ignores how quickly that boundary is moving. What is durable is human agency — the ability to set one's own goals, frame the problem worth solving, and remain the author of a decision.

Growing human agency has a defensive dimension, too: as AI becomes capable of producing extraordinarily persuasive, confident-sounding content at scale, the ability to evaluate whether something is true — not just plausible — becomes part of what protects independent judgment, not simply an academic skill.

Education systems should lead this shift by moving assessment away from rote recall and toward project-based work, applied research, oral defenses, and other forms of evaluation that require judgment, creativity, and critical and original thinking. This means changing what students learn, and what schools and universities recognize and reward. Employers should reinforce the same shift by updating hiring criteria, performance reviews, and promotion pathways to explicitly value human capabilities alongside technical proficiency. Organizations built around adaptable, judgment-driven people will be resilient and responsive to new technologies, markets, and forms of work.

**Foster entrepreneurial talent –
turn access into opportunity**

05

Talent-building that only prepares people for jobs that already exist stops short of what AI makes possible. The democratization of expertise ranks among AI's greatest benefits: the ability for individuals, small teams, and small and medium enterprises to access capabilities once available only to large organizations.

Therefore, education systems at all levels, as well as workforce development programs, should treat entrepreneurial thinking as a core literacy – helping people recognize where AI narrows the gap between having an idea and building something from it. However, entrepreneurship must remain an intentional choice for value creation rather than a substitute for those squeezed out of the job market.

For many, this will mean practicing entrepreneurial thinking inside an existing organization rather than founding one of their own – spotting a problem worth solving and building a solution for it, rather than waiting for a mandate. Intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship are two expressions of the same underlying capability. Talent building should include the capacity to create new value beyond pre-existing roles.

As AI closes the technical gap of commercializing a good idea, the barriers that remain are the ones AI cannot touch – capital, credibility, and access to networks. Universities are especially well positioned to close this remaining gap. Specifically, universities can connect first-time founders to investors and established partners they could not otherwise reach on their own. We therefore recommend pairing entrepreneurship curricula with practical instruments: seed grants or low-cost access to AI tools for first-time founders, structured mentorship connecting them with experienced entrepreneurs, and

streamlined regulatory on-ramps that let people test an idea without absorbing the overhead built for larger companies.

The need for an entrepreneurial mindset is nothing new — governments and universities have long built infrastructure, policy, and mechanisms to help entrepreneurs flourish and economies grow. Today, however, AI elevates the importance of entrepreneurial capability to critical status.

**Protect the pathway into
expertise — apprenticeship in
the AI era**

06

The anxiety young people feel about AI and their future is understandable: if AI performs the routine work through which early-career professionals have always built judgment — reviewing documents, drafting first passes, running the numbers — where do midlevel managers and the leaders of tomorrow gain those skills? Today, the learning-by-doing model that has trained experts for generations is broken.

The AI transformation of the workplace strands a second group, if differently: experienced workers with deep domain judgment who lack AI fluency. These two groups, and the challenges they face, have a shared solution. Universities and employers should design structured programs that pair early-career, AI-fluent workers with experienced colleagues.

Pairing alone will not rebuild what AI is removing. Organizations need to consciously recreate the developmental work itself — structured apprenticeships, planned rotations, and supervised AI-enabled practice that give early-career professionals opportunities to exercise judgment, not just observe it from the sidelines. Organizations that adopt AI while deliberately building cross-generational pathways for learning and expertise can gain productivity in the short term while strengthening the skills and judgment they will depend on in the future.

Build trust with the talent pipeline — especially young people

07

Talent-building depends on people believing there is a future worth training for — and that belief is eroding fastest among young people. A 2026 Gallup study found that excitement about AI among young people has dropped sharply over the past year while anger has risen in its place, a shift researchers link in part to AI narrowing the entry-level opportunities this generation was counting on. That unease is no longer private: it surfaced publicly and repeatedly at 2026 commencement ceremonies, where graduating students booed speakers for describing AI in positive terms.

Closing this gap will not be done through reassurance — young workers need to have real input in the direction of their organizations. Employers should establish early-career advisory councils with genuine authority over how AI tools are introduced into entry-level work and report openly on how adoption affects hiring and advancement. This is not simply goodwill: ManpowerGroup's 2026 Global Talent Barometer found that confidence in AI dropped as usage rose, a gap linked largely to employees receiving tools without adequate training, context, or support.

A talent pipeline with no say in decisions about its own future will not trust the technology it is being asked to build a career around.

Transform work, don't just optimize it

08

Productivity and task automation top the list of opportunities AI creates. Organizations naturally gravitate toward optimization, using AI to make it more productive: automating processes, reducing administrative effort, helping people perform current roles more effectively. However, AI adoption will raise opportunities for true transformation: if this organization was designed today, would work, decision-making, and structures still look the same?

Redesigning work around AI means rethinking it across five dimensions:

- Which tasks and decisions move where,
- How to structure the organization and distribute functions,
- How to coordinate work across units and teams,
- How to determine and track whether the organizational redesign is working, and

- Reimagining the physical space in which the resulting collaboration happens.

AI-ready workplaces have clear mechanisms.

Organizations should publish redesign plans showing which tasks are being reassigned to AI and which are being deliberately kept under human judgment, and how jobs will change as a result. Employees should have a voice in redesigning their roles, not just in adopting new tools, and organizations should track whether those changes are building workforce skills and capabilities, and not simply removing tasks.

With regard to redesigning physical spaces, office environments built for solitary, task-based work are poorly suited to the kind of human-to-human collaboration this shift now demands.

An AI ready organization redesigns work – its tasks, how it is organized and coordinated, its accountability, and the spaces it happens in – so AI and human judgment strengthen each other.

Manage workforce transitions deliberately – support workers, retain capability

09

Workforce displacement and job loss rank as a primary barrier to human-AI complementarity for nearly half of leaders surveyed – a risk worth planning for before it happens. Managing this well means two things at once: structured transition support for workers whose roles are eliminated or substantially changed, and direct engagement with employees on how AI is introduced into their work.

In practice, this looks specific – clear human-in-the-loop practices where AI decisions affect people directly, structured employee input before AI changes how a role is done, and straightforward channels to flag and fix problems when they arise. Organizations that engage employees as informed partners through the AI transition retain the institutional knowledge and trust that make any transition succeed; organizations that do not risk losing both.

Measure what matters – talent outcomes and human fulfillment

10

GDP and AI adoption rates cannot tell us whether talent-building is actually working, or for whom. What should replace those measures is specific: skills access and reskilling participation, job quality alongside job quantity, and wage growth tracked at median and lower-quartile levels rather than averages.

Yet the case for better metrics goes beyond economics: worker autonomy, reduced administrative burdens, job mobility, mental health, and meaningful work matter as much as employment figures. A talent agenda that only tracks whether people have jobs, without tracking whether they are equipped, growing, and hopeful about what comes next, is going in the wrong direction. Governments, employers, workforce development bodies, and universities should adopt metrics that capture both dimensions – talent outcomes and human fulfillment – with the same rigor applied to productivity and economic growth.

The Work Ahead

Talent development is a core competitiveness strategy, especially in the AI era. A skilled, adaptable workforce strengthens the foundations of economic competitiveness, alongside capital, infrastructure, and entrepreneurship. These investments reinforce one another and advance the sustainable, inclusive growth strategies the GFCC has championed since 2010.

This document builds on years of research and dialogue on what drives competitiveness — from strengthening economies and accelerating innovation while addressing societal challenges such as sustainability and inclusiveness to helping regions turn their own distinct assets into engines of growth. These recommendations add a new layer to that foundation: how education, skill development, and the redesign of work let AI amplify what people can achieve, advancing economies and prosperity in the process.

Building talent at the scale and speed this moment demands requires strengthening the skills that matter most while protecting human agency and ensuring all parts of the system reinforce one another.

Governments need to incentivize, fund, and scale what builds human capability and agency. Universities need to rethink what they teach and how they recognize capability, preparing graduates to exercise judgment, creativity, and critical thinking. Employers need to redesign work so people and AI strengthen each other, while preserving the pathways through which people develop expertise. Communities and institutions need to build trust deliberately, together with the people affected by these changes. When funding, curricula, hiring, organizational setups, and trust-building move in the same direction, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

We invite our members, fellows, and partners to bring these ten actions into their institutions, communities, and countries, and to keep sharing what works, what needs to improve and what should come next. Building the human edge starts the moment each of us turns these ideas into practice.

About the GFCC

The Global Federation of Competitiveness Councils (GFCC) is a network of leaders and organizations committed to enhancing sustainable growth through competitiveness strategies, amplifying and accelerating their evolution and best practices worldwide. The GFCC has pioneered the development of global competitiveness principles and members continue to co-create cross-border thinking and action on the field.

The GFCC is a global organization founded in 2010. Our network spans more than 30 countries across every continent and is composed of two key groups: members who secure their place through yearly dues, and distinguished experts who are invited to join as fellows.

By connecting businesses, civil society organizations, universities, and government agencies, the GFCC enables shared learning and access to world-class expertise for transformation. With a hands-on approach and focus on collaboration, the GFCC helps its members build and deploy strategies.



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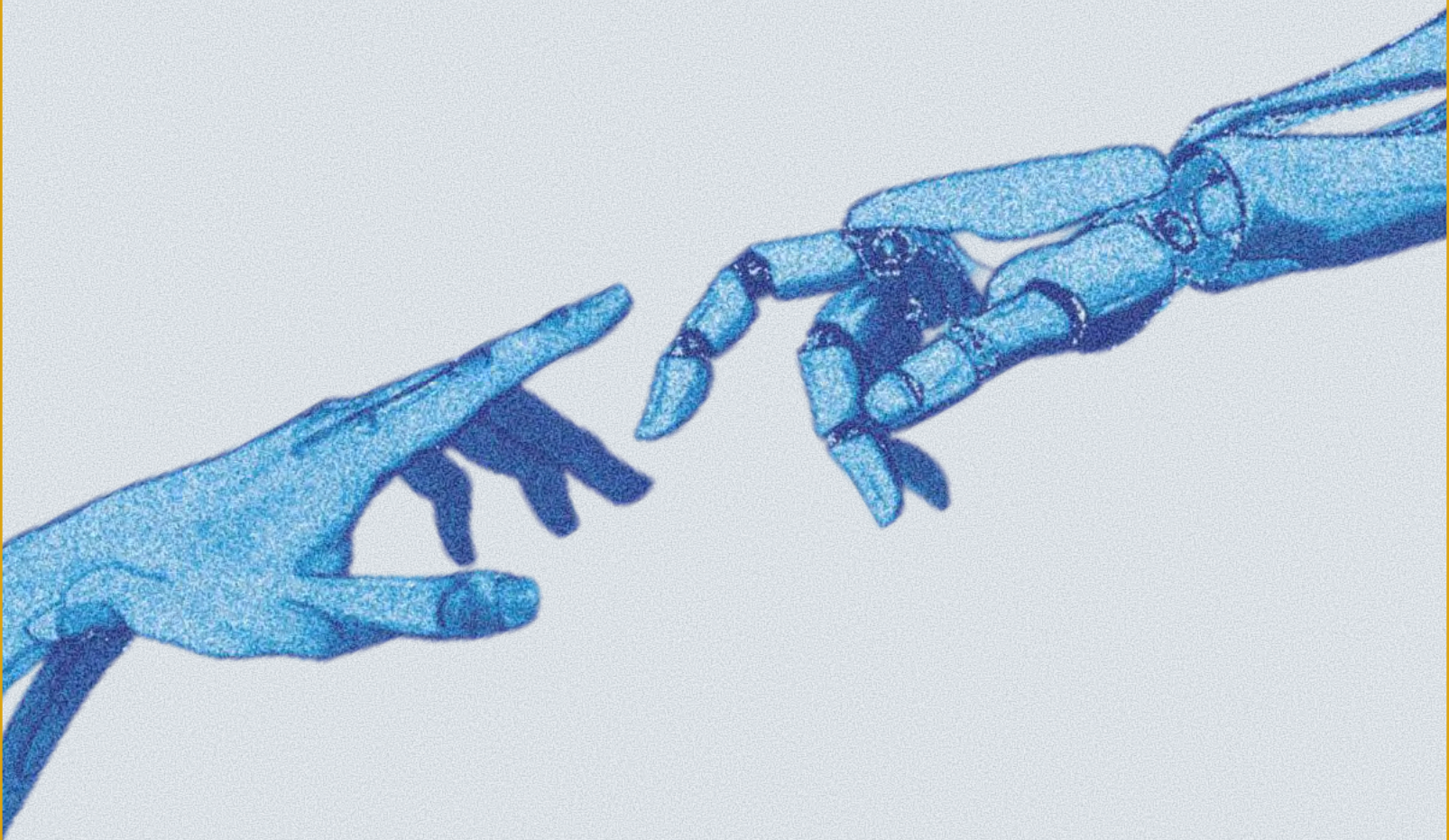
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