

The top AI fear for 6,000 tech pros isn't losing their jobs - it's more work for the same pay

Most tech professionals wouldn't recommend their own role to someone entering the industry today.

July 20, 2026 at 5:24 a.m. PT



Maskot/Maskot/Getty Images

Follow ZDNET: [Add us as a preferred source](#) on Google.

ZDNET's key takeaways

- Tech professionals are feeling squeezed by AI.
- Burnout is up, optimism is down, survey found.
- One solution is saying 'no' deliberately.

Many tech professionals are becoming disillusioned and burned out from constantly having to keep up with [the pace of change of new technology](#). Now, [the rise of AI](#) may be increasing their uncertainty and driving even more tech workers away.

Interestingly, this uncertainty is not related to [potential layoffs](#), but something else. "The number-one fear in tech right now is not losing your job to AI -- it's being squeezed to do more work for the same pay," according to Noam Segal and Lenny Rachitsky's latest tech worker sentiment [survey](#), covering 6,000 professionals: "AI raised the bar for output, and the reward was... more work for the same pay."

Also: [73% of tech job listings require AI skills now: How to show off yours](#)

Many technology professionals are feeling the impact of a changing environment firsthand. "I have a close friend who went from being a senior software engineer to school to start over as an X-ray technician," said Kaan Esendemir, AI application architect at UPS. "In my day-to-day as an AI app architect, I've noticed the lack of motivation or the assumption that AI can handle everything. I've noticed employees coming in early, taking lunch meetings, and leaving later, myself included, just to get ahead of the curve."

Notably, [burnout is up](#), while optimism is down among tech pros, Segal and Rachitsky found in their survey: "Shipping faster is burning people out. More prototypes, more product requirements documents, more agents, more output. The speed AI unlocked got plowed straight back into expectations."

Tellingly, they also discovered most tech professionals wouldn't recommend

their own role to someone entering the industry today.

Also: [The 3 types of people who will excel in the AI agent era, according to tech leaders](#)

AI is actually being viewed through two opposite lenses. Half of respondents to Segal and Rachitsky's survey said they feel "amplified -- more capable, more productive, more excited about their future. The other half feel their role is being redefined, that they're feeling destabilized or that they've been diminished." There is also an emerging risk called "cognitive rot," in which tech pros "see the AI's initial output, accept it without applying their judgment, and gradually let their own critical thinking atrophy."

How to take back control

It isn't just AI creating a sense of burnout and frustration across all industries. Laura Spencer, chief academic officer at an elite academic academy, who was an IT director herself, observed how, "K-12 tech leaders are expected to move at the same speed as the private sector while working inside FERPA, state privacy law, and a school board that needs a year to approve what a vendor ships in a month. That gap between expected pace and permitted pace is what pushes people out, quietly disengaged if not gone outright."

Spencer urged tech pros to "stop trying to learn every new release. Build a habit of deliberate evaluation instead. I use four questions before adopting anything: What is it for? What does it strengthen? What does it replace? And the one people skip: what does it allow to be done poorly? That last one catches the tools that quietly erode a skill before anyone notices it's gone."

Also: [How to beat the AI algorithm and get the job of your dreams](#)

The real skill "is telling waves from ripples," said Joel Marotti, senior managing partner at Vertical Media Solutions: "Most of what churns through

tech is a ripple. A wave changes how the work gets done. There have been maybe five of those in the last three decades. When a real wave hits, you don't need a certification. You need one real project where you apply the new tool to your actual domain. That's like a week of focused effort, not a year of anxiety."

Learn to say 'no' to a tool, she added. "Saying no to a tool, deliberately, is still expertise. In education, where the risk lands on kids, and not just quarterly numbers, that's not caution. It's the job."

Providing tech professionals opportunities to learn and explore tools and technologies may be key to alleviating feelings of frustration and burnout. "Personally, I don't like just picking up a tool with no random use case and just experimenting with it," said Cameron Adams, chief product officer and co-founder at Canva. "I really like to take something that I'm working on now or a problem that I'm feeling, and then bring a tool to bear on that and learn through that process. I think that's how we've seen our staff get the most value out of AI experimentation, when they're dealing with a real problem."

Also: ['The SaaS apocalypse is overrated': How Workday and other software providers plan to survive AI](#)

Adams said it's important to provide such freedom, "because employees need to feel comfortable experimenting," she suggested. "We're all terribly busy and naturally fall into the patterns we would normally do things in. We give our staff plenty of time to just sit back, put down their tools, get out of business as usual, and get stuff done."

In conclusion, it's impossible to try to keep up with every new development. "Identify the technology changes that are certain to continue, then focus on the skills tied to those changes," said Daniel Burrus, technology futurist and AI expert in residence at High Point University. "AI will keep advancing. Automation will keep expanding. Data, cybersecurity, and human judgment will remain central. Spend less time chasing product announcements and

more time learning how these shifts affect your role, customers, and industry."

Trying to keep up with every release "is a losing game at this point, so I'd stop trying," agreed Riken Shah, founder and CEO of OSP Labs. "What holds up is depth in a few things, such as systems thinking, architecture, security, actually knowing how to solve a hard problem, and enough surface awareness of everything else to know when it's worth a closer look. AI fits into that as leverage on what you already know."

Artificial Intelligence