

AI-Supported Career Development: Opportunities, Challenges and a Human-Centred Framework for Sustainable Employability

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Abstract

Purpose. Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded in human resource development, learning, talent management and career-support processes. This conceptual article examines how AI can contribute to employee career development and sustainable employability while preserving human agency.

Approach. The article integrates recent scholarship published primarily during 2023–2026 with established career and sustainable-employability perspectives. **Findings.** Recent reviews show that AI can improve career exploration, skills analysis, personalized learning and career management, but can also intensify job insecurity, privacy concerns, perceived unfairness and over-reliance on algorithmic recommendations. Empirical studies further indicate that transparency, data governance, trusted leadership, human involvement and AI literacy are relevant to employee trust and acceptance. **Contribution.** The article develops a Human-AI Career Development Framework with eight iterative stages—Profile, Diagnose, Recommend, Deliberate, Human Review, Act, Evaluate and Update. The framework assigns complementary AI and human roles, embeds governance safeguards at each stage, and links the process to employability outcomes. It therefore extends existing discussions of AI-enabled career development from a technology-centred recommendation model to a human-governed, feedback-oriented employability system.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; career development; sustainable employability; employee trust; AI acceptance; career adaptability; human-AI collaboration; HRD; responsible AI

1. Introduction

Career development has traditionally been an important component of human resource management (HRM) and employee development. Organizations have supported employee careers through training, performance appraisal, mentoring, coaching, job rotation, promotion and succession planning, while employees have been expected to identify interests, build competencies and respond to available opportunities. The contemporary work environment makes this process more dynamic because digitalization, automation, hybrid work, changing occupational structures and rapid shifts in skill requirements have weakened the assumption of a predictable career ladder.

Artificial intelligence is becoming an important infrastructure for this changing career environment. AI systems can process large volumes of information about competencies, job requirements, learning histories, internal vacancies and labour-market signals. This creates possibilities for personalized skills assessment, learning recommendations, internal mobility and career exploration. Recent reviews confirm that AI is increasingly relevant across career stages and career-management activities, while also emphasizing that its effects can be double-edged: AI may facilitate career development but may also generate insecurity, ethical concerns and inappropriate reliance on automated advice (Pandya & Wang, 2024; Bankins et al., 2024).

Career development, however, is not simply a matching problem between a person and a job. Career decisions involve aspirations, values,

identity, motivation, family and life circumstances, preferred ways of working and interpretations of future possibilities. Some of these dimensions are difficult to observe or quantify. An AI system can therefore produce a technically plausible recommendation that is personally unsuitable. Recent evidence from organizational career-development settings also indicates that reduced human involvement can affect employees' perceptions of fairness, satisfaction and privacy (Köchling et al., 2025).

Accordingly, the central issue is not whether AI should replace human career judgement, but how AI and human actors can be deliberately combined. This article develops that perspective through a

Human-AI Career Development Framework designed around employee agency, transparent decision processes, human review and continuous updating.

2. Background and Evolution of Career Development

Career development has moved from relatively linear organizational progression toward a more fluid process involving transitions across organizations, occupations, projects, skills and work identities. The focus has therefore shifted from promotion alone toward employability, career adaptability, continuous learning and the capacity to navigate changing work environments.

Career approach	Core characteristics	Implication for AI-supported development
Traditional career	Long-term organizational employment and hierarchical progression	AI can document progression but should not assume linear career preferences.
Organizational career planning	Promotion, succession and structured development	AI can improve visibility of opportunities and skill requirements.
Individual career management	Employee responsibility for career decisions	AI can expand information access and personalize development resources.
Boundaryless / protean career	Movement across organizations, roles and career identities	AI can support labour-market intelligence and transferable-skill mapping.
Digital career development	Online learning, platforms, analytics and digital job matching	AI can provide continuous, data-informed guidance.
AI-supported career development	Personalized recommendations, skills analytics, scenario generation and intelligent matching	Human judgement and governance are required to contextualize recommendations and preserve agency.

3. Problem Statement and Research Gap

Organizations increasingly need to connect employee capabilities with rapidly changing skill requirements, while employees need to identify learning priorities and career options under conditions of uncertainty. AI can address information and scale constraints, but its use also introduces risks involving bias, privacy, explainability, technological dependence, reduced interpersonal interaction and employee resistance.

The recent literature makes the need for a more integrated conceptual approach clearer. Pandya and Wang (2024), in a scoping review of 101 journal publications, identify both enabling and disruptive effects of AI in career development. Bankins et al. (2024), reviewing 104 empirical articles, show that

AI influences career exploration, guidance, career management and career competencies across career stages. Yet these reviews also point toward unresolved questions concerning how AI should be embedded into career processes in ways that promote sustainable and equitable careers.

A second gap concerns the decision process itself. Existing work identifies important applications—skills analytics, career matching, learning recommendations and AI-enabled guidance—but comparatively less conceptual attention is given to the sequence through which an AI recommendation becomes a career action. In particular, there is a need to distinguish data profiling from diagnosis, recommendation from deliberation, and AI output from human-authorized action.

A third gap concerns trust and acceptance. Recent empirical studies examine transparency, data governance, leadership, human involvement and trust, but these factors are often discussed as separate adoption issues rather than as governance conditions embedded within the career-development process. For example, Shamim et al. (2023) found that AI features and effective data governance were associated with cognitive trust, while Xu et al. (2024) found that trustworthy leadership, explanations of AI benefits and risks, familiarity and supportive training resources were relevant to initial trust and adoption intentions. Köchling et al. (2025) further showed that the degree of human involvement in AI-supported career decisions affects fairness and privacy reactions.

A fourth gap concerns sustainable employability. Existing AI-and-career research frequently emphasizes employability, career adaptability or skill acquisition, but sustainable employability is broader: it concerns whether people can continue to make a valuable contribution over time while maintaining health, welfare, capabilities and access to enabling work conditions (van der Klink et al., 2016). A framework that links AI-supported career decisions directly to sustainable employability outcomes is therefore needed.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following conceptual gap: the literature provides evidence on what AI can do in career development, but needs a clearer human-governed process model explaining how AI-generated information should move through diagnosis, recommendation, deliberation, human review, action, evaluation and updating to produce sustainable employability outcomes.

4. Objectives and Research Questions

- To examine the emerging role of AI in contemporary career development.
- To synthesize recent evidence on AI-enabled skills development, career exploration, learning and internal mobility.

- To clarify the meaning of sustainable employability in an AI-transformed work environment.
- To examine employee trust and acceptance conditions relevant to AI-supported career development.
- To identify ethical and governance safeguards for AI-supported career decisions.
- To propose an iterative Human-AI Career Development Framework linking AI capabilities with human judgement and employability outcomes.

The article addresses five research questions:

RQ1: How is AI transforming contemporary career development practices?

RQ2: How can AI support personalized career planning, learning and skills development?

RQ3: What factors influence employee trust and acceptance of AI-supported career recommendations?

RQ4: What governance and ethical safeguards are required when AI informs career decisions?

RQ5: How can AI-supported career processes be organized to strengthen sustainable employability?

5. Conceptual Basis and Recent Literature

5.1 AI in Career Development

AI-supported career development refers to the use of AI technologies to assist individuals and organizations with career exploration, competency assessment, learning, internal mobility, labour-market analysis and career decision support. Typical inputs may include qualifications, work experience, skills, learning histories, performance information, career interests, job preferences and labour-market data. The output may include skill-gap profiles, learning recommendations, role matches, career scenarios and information about future skill requirements.

The recent literature suggests that AI should be understood as a career-support infrastructure rather than simply a recommendation engine. Pandya and Wang (2024) identify AI's potential to streamline career-development processes while also noting job insecurity and ethical concerns. Bankins et al. (2024) show that AI can influence career trajectories and competencies across multiple career

stages. Lin et al. (2024) provide a further caution: organizational AI adoption can reduce employees' self-perceived employability in some contexts, with the resulting career behaviour depending on individuals' future-work-self salience. These findings indicate that the consequences of AI are contingent on how employees interpret and use the technology.

5.2 Major Applications

Application	Potential contribution
AI-based skills assessment	Identifies current competencies, maps skills to role requirements and highlights development gaps.
Personalized career recommendations	Generates possible pathways using competencies, interests, organizational opportunities and labour-market signals.
Personalized learning	Recommends courses, projects, certifications and learning resources aligned with identified gaps.
Internal mobility	Matches transferable skills with internal roles, projects, rotations and cross-functional opportunities.
Succession support	Helps identify development needs and possible successor pools, while avoiding automated determinations of leadership potential.
Career assistants and chatbots	Provide accessible information on roles, learning resources, internal vacancies and career questions.
Labour-market intelligence	Monitors emerging occupations, skills, credentials and changes in demand to support forward-looking planning.

5.3 Sustainable Employability: An Academic Definition

Sustainable employability should not be reduced to the ability to obtain a job or to accumulate marketable skills. Van der Klink et al. (2016) conceptualize sustainable employability from a capability perspective: throughout working lives, people need real opportunities and capabilities to make a valuable contribution through work now and in the future while safeguarding health and welfare, supported by an enabling work context and the motivation to use those opportunities. Recent scholarship continues to treat sustainable employability as a longitudinal and multidimensional construct shaped by interactions among individual, work and environmental characteristics (Gürbüz et al., 2024).

For the present article, sustainable employability is defined as: “the sustained capacity and opportunity of an individual to contribute meaningfully to work over time by maintaining relevant capabilities, adapting to changing work demands, exercising career agency, and doing so within conditions that support health, welfare and continued access to productive employment.” This definition deliberately combines capability, adaptability, agency and enabling context. It also means that AI-supported career development should be evaluated not only by immediate matching accuracy, but by whether it improves longer-term capability, adaptability, mobility and quality of working life.

5.4 AI, Employability and Career Adaptability

AI can contribute to employability when it helps employees recognize emerging skills, understand

transferable capabilities, select relevant learning and monitor progress. Recent studies also indicate that the relationship is not automatically positive. Cheng et al. (2025) examine employability skills in AI-driven labour-market transformations, while Shen et al. (2026), using data from 689 Chinese students, report that AI acceptance was positively associated with perceived employability through positive AI attitudes and career adaptability. Wu et al. (2026) similarly identify unresolved mechanisms in AI-era employability development, including the challenge of skill gaps. These findings support a capability-building interpretation of AI: the objective is not simply to make employees better at using AI, but to help them remain capable of learning, adapting and making informed career choices.

5.5 Employee Trust and AI Acceptance

Employee trust is a central condition for AI-supported career development because career recommendations can affect identity, opportunity and perceived future security. Trust should not be treated as an attitude that organizations merely need to increase; it is partly a response to the quality of the AI system and the organizational process surrounding it.

Recent empirical evidence supports several mechanisms. Shamim et al. (2023), using interviews and a quantitative study of 314 front-line employees in Pakistan, found that AI features were positively associated with cognitive trust, while disruption of work routines was negatively associated with trust; effective data governance also supported trust. Xu et al. (2024), in an experimental survey of 426 employees in China, found that initial trust was important to AI adoption and that trustworthy leadership, explanation of AI benefits and risks, familiarity with AI in HRM and supportive training resources were relevant to trust and adoption intentions. Arora and Mittal (2024) found that AI-related trust played a mediating role in employees' intentions to adopt AI in HR functions.

Evidence specific to career development is especially important. Köchling, Wehner and Ruhle (2025) used scenario-based experiments with 280 participants and an additional causal-chain sample of 157 participants. Their findings indicate that lower human involvement in career-development decisions can reduce perceived fairness and increase privacy intrusion; fairness and privacy reactions were also linked to organizational attractiveness and turnover intention. This supports the present framework's requirement that AI recommendations remain reviewable and that employees have opportunities to question, contextualize and contest them.

Other recent evidence reinforces the importance of transparency. A 2023 experimental study with 375 participants found that AI transparency, compared with opacity, produced higher challenge appraisals and trust and lower threat appraisals (Zhang et al., 2023). More recent work in India reports that algorithmic transparency, perceived fairness and human-in-the-loop oversight can strengthen employee trust in AI-enabled HRM and support employee autonomy (2026). Together, these findings suggest that acceptance is more likely when employees can understand the role of AI, trust the surrounding organization, receive adequate support, and retain meaningful human oversight.

Accordingly, the framework treats trust and acceptance as process outcomes supported by five conditions: transparency, data stewardship, perceived fairness, human review and AI literacy. These conditions are not optional add-ons; they are governance mechanisms that shape whether employees can use AI recommendations constructively.

6. Human-AI Career Development Framework

The proposed framework extends the article's earlier AI-versus-human division of roles into an eight-stage iterative process. The stages are deliberately sequential but not strictly linear: evaluation and new information feed back into the profile, diagnosis and subsequent recommendations. AI performs high-volume analytical and

informational tasks; humans retain contextual interpretation, deliberation, authorization and accountability.

Stage	AI role	Human role	Governance safeguard	Employability outcome
1. Profile	Integrates declared skills, experience, learning history, preferences and relevant labour-market information.	Validate, correct and decide what information may be used.	Data minimization; consent/notice; accuracy checks; access controls.	More accurate and employee-owned career baseline.
2. Diagnose	Identifies skill gaps, strengths, transferable capabilities and possible development constraints.	Interpret findings in light of aspirations, context, values and career identity.	Bias testing; explainable outputs; uncertainty indicators.	Greater self-awareness and targeted development priorities.
3. Recommend	Generates career pathways, roles, learning options and alternative scenarios.	Assess relevance and request alternatives or additional evidence.	No automatic career decision; recommendation provenance; contestability.	Broader opportunity awareness and informed choice.
4. Deliberate	Simulates pathway implications, skill requirements, time horizons and possible trade-offs.	Compare options, reflect on values and preferences, discuss with managers/counsellors/mentors.	Human dialogue; no coercive nudging; disclosure of limitations.	Career adaptability and decision quality.
5. Human Review	Provides evidence, rationale, confidence/uncertainty and alternative options.	Make or authorize the career decision; contextualize exceptional circumstances.	Human-in-the-loop; accountability owner; right to challenge.	Agency, fairness and contextual fit.
6. Act	Supports learning enrolment, project matching, internal applications and progress tracking.	Choose, undertake and document development actions.	Voluntary participation; equal access; monitoring for adverse impact.	Capability growth, mobility and learning transfer.
7. Evaluate	Tracks skill gains, outcomes, pathway fit and changes in labour-market signals.	Interpret results, reflect on experience and identify unintended effects.	Outcome auditing; privacy protection; employee feedback.	Evidence of employability and pathway effectiveness.
8. Update	Refreshes the profile, diagnoses new gaps and revises recommendations.	Confirm changes, redefine goals and decide whether to continue, change or stop.	Versioning; audit trails; periodic bias/privacy review.	Continuous employability and resilience to change.

Framework logic: Profile → Diagnose → Recommend → Deliberate → Human Review → Act → Evaluate → Update → (return to Profile).

The central conceptual proposition is that AI contributes most effectively when it operates as a decision-support and learning infrastructure rather than as an autonomous career authority. The framework therefore separates recommendation from decision, and decision from evaluation. This separation makes it possible to audit whether AI-supported recommendations are actually improving employability rather than simply increasing system usage.

7. Governance Principles for Human-Centred Career AI

Governance principle	Application to career development
Transparency	Employees should know when AI is used, what categories of data inform a recommendation, what the system is intended to do and what its limitations are.
Data governance	Collect only necessary information, define retention and access rules, protect employee data and provide clear routes for correction.
Fairness and bias control	Test outputs for disparate patterns, review training and reference data, and monitor outcomes across employee groups.
Human oversight	Assign a responsible human decision-maker for consequential career actions; human review should be substantive rather than a formal rubber stamp.
Contestability	Employees should be able to question, correct and request reconsideration of AI-supported recommendations.
Autonomy	Career recommendations should not become compulsory pathways. Employees should retain meaningful choice over development goals.
AI literacy	Employees and managers need sufficient understanding of AI strengths, limitations, uncertainty and appropriate use.
Continuous auditing	Systems should be periodically evaluated for accuracy, drift, bias, privacy risks and unintended employability effects.

8. Conceptual Propositions

P1: AI-enabled career information quality is positively associated with the usefulness of career-development decisions when employee data are accurate, relevant and appropriately governed.

P2: Human deliberation and review strengthen the contextual fit of AI-generated career recommendations by incorporating aspirations, values, identity and circumstances that are not reliably represented in organizational data.

P3: Transparency, perceived fairness, effective data governance, trusted leadership and AI literacy strengthen employee trust and acceptance of AI-supported career development.

P4: Meaningful human oversight and contestability reduce the risk that AI recommendations are experienced as coercive, opaque or privacy-intrusive career decisions.

P5: The combination of AI-supported diagnosis and personalized learning with employee agency strengthens career adaptability, capability development and employability over time.

P6: Continuous evaluation and updating are necessary because skills, occupations, employee aspirations and labour-market conditions change;

therefore, sustainable employability requires an iterative rather than one-time recommendation process.

9. Implications for HR Professionals, Employees and Organizations

9.1 HR professionals and managers

HR professionals should define the purpose and limits of career AI before selecting technologies. They should establish accountable human-review points, explain data practices, audit outputs, provide appeal channels and ensure that development opportunities are not restricted to employees who are already digitally confident. Managers should use AI outputs as prompts for developmental conversations rather than as definitive judgements about potential.

9.2 Employees

Employees should be positioned as active participants in the process. They need opportunities to validate their profiles, interpret recommendations, seek alternatives, reject unsuitable pathways and update career goals. AI literacy should include the ability to question data quality, recognize uncertainty, compare multiple

options and combine AI information with human advice.

9.3 Organizations

Organizations should evaluate career AI against longer-term employability outcomes rather than short-term efficiency alone. Relevant indicators include participation in learning, skill acquisition, internal mobility, career adaptability, perceived employability, employee trust, fairness perceptions, privacy concerns and the quality of career conversations. Governance should also include periodic review of whether AI-supported processes unintentionally narrow opportunity or reproduce historical inequalities.

10. Discussion

The conceptual contribution of this article lies in repositioning AI-supported career development as an iterative socio-technical process. Existing literature has established that AI can support career guidance, skills analysis and learning, and recent empirical research has clarified important determinants of trust and acceptance. The proposed framework connects these streams by specifying how AI information moves through eight stages before and after a career action.

First, the framework distinguishes information processing from decision authority. AI can profile, diagnose and recommend, but deliberation and human review preserve employee agency. Second, it integrates trust and governance into the career process itself. Transparency, data governance, fairness, human oversight and contestability are treated as mechanisms that enable responsible use rather than as separate ethical considerations. Third, the framework makes employability dynamic: evaluation and updating ensure that recommendations respond to changing skills, roles, aspirations and labour-market conditions.

This contribution is consistent with recent research showing that AI can simultaneously create opportunities and risks. Bankins et al. (2024) emphasize AI's influence across career stages; Pandya and Wang (2024) identify both facilitation and disruption; Lin et al. (2024) demonstrate that

organizational AI adoption can have contingent effects on perceived employability and proactive career behaviour; and Shen et al. (2026) link AI acceptance with career adaptability and perceived employability. The framework therefore avoids a purely optimistic or pessimistic position and instead specifies the organizational conditions under which AI can support sustainable career development.

11. Limitations and Future Research

This article is conceptual and does not empirically test the proposed eight-stage framework. The framework should therefore be treated as a set of theoretically informed propositions rather than a validated causal model. Future research can develop and test measures for each stage and examine whether the complete cycle improves sustainable employability compared with conventional career-development processes.

Longitudinal research is particularly needed because employability and career outcomes develop over time. Future studies should also compare sectors, occupational groups and organizational contexts, and should examine how employee characteristics, AI literacy, career stage and labour-market conditions shape outcomes. Experimental research can test different levels of human involvement, explanation and contestability. Research should also examine unintended consequences, including over-reliance on AI, narrowing of career aspirations, privacy concerns, unequal access to development resources and changes in employees' perceived autonomy.

Finally, future studies should connect system-level AI measures with meaningful career outcomes rather than relying only on adoption or satisfaction measures. Outcomes such as skill growth, internal mobility, career adaptability, perceived employability, sustainable employability, well-being and quality of career decisions would provide stronger evidence of whether AI is creating durable value.

12. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is changing career development by increasing the scale and speed with which employee skills, learning opportunities, roles and labour-market information can be analyzed. Recent research demonstrates both the potential and the risks of this transformation. AI can personalize development and improve access to career information, but opaque systems, weak data governance, perceived unfairness, privacy intrusion and excessive automation can undermine trust and employee agency.

The article's central conceptual contribution is the Human-AI Career Development Framework, which organizes career support as an eight-stage, iterative process: Profile → Diagnose → Recommend → Deliberate → Human Review → Act → Evaluate → Update. The framework clarifies what AI should do, what humans must do, and which governance safeguards should operate at each stage. It also links each stage to employability outcomes, thereby moving the discussion from isolated AI applications toward a coherent model of sustainable career development.

The framework consequently proposes a different basis for evaluating AI in career development. The question is not simply whether AI can make recommendations accurately or efficiently. The more consequential question is whether AI helps people build capabilities, adapt to changing work, exercise meaningful career choice and sustain valuable participation in work over time. When AI is combined with human deliberation, accountable review, employee contestability and continuous evaluation, it can function as an augmentation technology that strengthens rather than displaces the human dimensions of career development.

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