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Managing AI-led and AI-generated Processes: Reframing Organizational Change When AI Drives Change

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> Marty: Wait a minute. Wait a minute Doc, uh, are you tellin' me you built a time machine… out of a Delorean?
>
> Doc: The way I see it, if you're gonna build a time machine into a car, why not do it with some style? Besides, the stainless steel construction made the flux dispersal…*[his watch beeps]* Look out! *[He pushes Marty out of way just as the Delorean reappears, exactly one minute after it vanished. Doc then cautiously approaches the time machine. But when he touches the door handle. He immediately recoils and shakes his hand in pain.]*
>
> (Zemeckis, 1985, Back To the Future)

In January 2026, Dario Amodei, the founder of Anthropic, published a long note on how he saw the current role of AI: "we are entering a rite of passage, both turbulent and inevitable, which will test who we are as a species" (Amodei, 2026). Following Amodei, the current situation is both one of continuity and disruption in which AI represents the transition from technology teenage, representing just another episode in a

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long history of technological disruption, into technology adulthood, constituted by a qualitatively different form of change; one that challenges the assumptions, lessons, and responses inherited from previous technological eras.

Organizations have repeatedly, historically encountered technologies that appeared capable of fundamentally reshaping work, authority, expertise, and organizational life (Giddens, 1990; Orlikowski, 2007). From the adoption of computing technologies (Kimble & McLoughlin, 1995), the emergence of the internet as an organizational infrastructure (Nielsen, 2008), and more recently cloud computing (Gangwar, 2017), technologically induced change has continually shaped how we understand jobs, organizations, institutions, and our place as humans within them. At its most fundamental level, technological change has always been intertwined with social change. The steam engine transformed production processes, electrification reconfigured the length and timing of a workday, computers altered administrative work, enterprise systems integrated organizational processes, and digital platforms reshaped markets and industries. Each technological wave generated a familiar cycle of optimism, uncertainty, anxiety, and adaptation, and variants of these reactions (see Edgerton, 2007; Ellul, 1954/1964; Grint & Woolgar, 2013; Toffler, 1970).

Despite the potential for positive change, the promises of greater efficiency and progress have often been accompanied by concerns about job loss, diminished human autonomy, new forms of control, and widespread social disruption. In many respects, artificial intelligence is both different and the same; the latest technology to provoke this combination of hope and apprehension. Yet before concluding that AI represents an entirely unprecedented challenge, it is worth asking whether the social and organizational responses surrounding AI and its associated change may themselves be highly familiar. Adopting a change lens pushes us to ask whether we have been here before?

Contemporary discussions of AI frequently portray the technology as transformative both for positive and negative reasons. Scholars, consultants, policymakers, and executives alike describe AI as fundamentally altering organizations, leadership, work, decision-making, and even the nature of organizational change itself (Faraj et al., 2018; Jarrahi, 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020). At the same time, predictions of radical disruption abound. Some envisage vast productivity gains and new forms of innovation, while others warn of large-scale displacement of workers, growing inequality, diminished human agency, and the erosion of institutional trust (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). This divergence creates a strange sentiment for both scholars and practitioners. Clearly, we cannot ignore the challenge that AI presents, in both the speed and capacity of changes.

The fear and concern surrounding AI-driven change are both understandable and well-founded. The prospect of increasingly autonomous and generative systems raises important questions regarding accountability, expertise, governance, and ethics. Change theories and methods have the capacity to link past and future; for example, Organization Development (Hastings & Schwarz, 2022; Wolfram Cox, 2022) and then sensemaking or storytelling (Boje, 2014; Kertechian, 2025; Mirvis, 2005) historically show us how dialog on the past often directs our actions into the future. Unlike

earlier technological innovations that often emerged gradually through universities, governments, or proprietary organizational systems before diffusing more broadly (e.g., Edgerton, 2007; Pettigrew, 1985), AI has entered public discourse at extraordinary speed, generating societal conversations and predictions long before scholarship has had the opportunity to fully assess its consequences. The risk is therefore not that we underestimate AI, but that in the urgency to respond we overlook historical lessons and knowledge that may help us interpret and manage AI-driven change more effectively.

As a result, organizations and scholars face an intriguing dilemma. We can slow down and make sense of the AI juggernaut, recognizing that its rapid evolution may outpace our analytical capabilities. Alternatively, we can attempt to run alongside AI's development, seeking to guide and manage its impacts in real time, while risking flawed assumptions and unintended consequences. We contend, however, that recognizing the significance of AI also requires resisting a tendency toward technological exceptionalism, namely the assumption that existing theories, concepts, and accumulated knowledge about technologically induced change are suddenly obsolete or no longer relevant. Rather than choosing between inherited knowledge and contemporary novelty, the challenge is to determine where existing insights remain useful and where they genuinely require revision.

In this Focus Forum, as part of our provocation, we assert that although in many contemporary discussions AI is positioned as a rupture with the past, it doesn't necessarily follow that previous experiences with technological change offer little guidance at best, or are obsolete at worst, unable to match what is on the horizon. Headlines regularly frame AI as posing risks comparable to pandemics and nuclear war ("AI Is as Risky as Pandemics and Nuclear War, Top CEOs Say," Perrigo, Time, 2023), threatening widespread labor displacement ("Tens of Thousands of White-Collar Jobs Are Disappearing as AI Starts to Bite," *WSJ*, 2025), and fundamentally reshaping industries and societies ("Nearly 200 Economists and Tech Leaders Warn of A.I. Threats," Casselman, *NYT*, 2026). While such claims underscore the significance of AI, they can also encourage a form of technological exceptionalism, risking minimizing our practical and scientific understanding of what is increasingly obvious on AI change. Without a more informed approach, we risk encouraging what might be termed historical amnesia: a tendency to overlook decades of scholarly practice examining how technologies reshape organizations, redistribute power, alter work, generate positive and negative reactions to change, and create intended as well as unintended consequences. Organizational scholars have spent successive generations asking questions on technologically led change. We need to leverage and incorporate this substantial intellectual inheritance.

Against this backdrop, this Forum issue advances a deliberately balanced position: the task is not to decide whether AI is entirely novel or entirely familiar, but to determine what remains constant and what genuinely differs. We propose two complementary orientations. The first is retrospective, drawing on decades of scholarship on socio-technical systems, technology adoption, and organizational learning to counter

a tendency toward historical amnesia. The second is prospective, engaging with novelty and exploring organizational futures that cannot be inferred from historical experience alone. Together, these perspectives create a more balanced foundation for understanding AI-led and AI-generated change.

Our central proposition is simple: the tension between opportunity and threat, continuity and disruption, control and autonomy has always accompanied technological change. AI may transform the nature of work and organization, but responding to technological transformation is itself a familiar challenge. The question ahead is not whether AI matters—it clearly does—but whether organizational change scholars can draw on accumulated lessons of previous technological transformations while developing new approaches for the realities now unfolding.

The Familiar Ambivalence Toward New Technology

In 1997, Jeff Bezos described the emerging "World Wide Web" as a mechanism for commerce and customer engagement, with no suggestion that it would reshape economic and social life (Bezos, 1997). Two years later, Time named him Person of the Year for having "helped build the foundation of our future" (Time, 1999)—praise offered before more than a handful of critics asked what else the machine was automating for (e.g., Fernback, 2007; Humphreys, 2006; Odlyzko, 2003). By 2026, Amazon is a behemoth shaping modern life in both beneficial and detrimental ways; a trajectory underpinning this forum issue on AI change.

From the introduction of industrial machinery and information technologies to enterprise systems, digital platforms, and cloud computing, organizations have repeatedly confronted the challenge of implementing and adapting to technological change while simultaneously managing its intended and unintended consequences. AI represents the latest version of the familiar anxiety of a new, unfamiliar technology. Several years before Amazon's creation, futurists such as Alvin Toffler, Shoshana Zuboff, and Ray Kurzweil warned that accelerating technological change would generate opportunity alongside widespread uncertainty, disruption, and anxiety. Their response to this change was not one of technological pessimism. Rather, it was a call to better understand the social and organizational consequences of technological innovation and to develop institutions capable of adapting to continual change. Despite often reflecting on quite dark themes, their accounts mostly presented a realistic, nuanced view on the continuum of technology possibilities. For example, Toffler (1980) argued that "…there are powerful reasons for long-range optimism, even if the transitional years immediately ahead are likely to be stormy and crisis-ridden" (p. 3). While Zuboff (1988) pitched a more tempered account, recognizing the impact of "a powerful new technology, such as that represented by the computer, fundamentally reorganizes the infrastructure of our material world. It eliminates former alternatives. It creates new possibilities. It necessitates fresh choices" (p. 5). This history and its flow on discussion point to a possible pathway of debate and interest in the phase of current change wrought by artificial intelligence.

AI has become the latest object of organizational fascination, optimism, and concern, often presenting allied change as both ground-shaking and risky. Its increasing use and placement has created uncertainty and questioning in both scholarship and practice (Thorp, 2026). Yet taking the history of and debate on technology impact into account, and encapsulating Toffler's long-term optimist mantra, perhaps AI-driven change in the organization is more nuanced than we attribute it.

Looking Back: What We Already Know About Technology and Change

One of the most striking features of current discussions about AI is the extent to which they echo earlier debates about technological change. Long before the emergence of large language models or generative AI, organizational scholars examined how new technologies transform work, reshape organizational structures, alter patterns of control, and create both opportunities and disruptions. Questions concerning how new technologies reshape human behavior, social relations, institutions, work, identity, and collective futures have occupied scholars across sociology, psychology, anthropology, science and technology studies, communication, and related disciplines for decades, producing a rich body of scholarship on technological change and its consequences (e.g., Bijker et al., 1987; Grint & Woolgar, 1997; Liker et al., 1999; Rogers, 2003; Suchman, 1987; see also Kanitz et al., 2026; Oreg et al., 2011; Schwarz, 2012).

As a result, the organizational sciences possess a rich intellectual tradition devoted to understanding the relationship between technology and organization. Rather than beginning from a position of ignorance, researchers confronting AI have inherited decades of theoretical and empirical insight on individual, relational, and organizational perspectives on socio-technical systems (e.g., Trist & Bamforth, 1951), technology adoption (e.g., Rogers, 2003), organizational learning (e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1978), workplace transformation (e.g., Barley, 1986), institutional adaptation (e.g., Orlikowski, 1992), and technological disruption (e.g., Christensen, 1997). This accumulated body of knowledge provides a foundation for interpreting contemporary debates surrounding AI and its organizational implications.

Importantly, this historical perspective does not imply that AI is simply another technology or that its distinctive characteristics should be ignored. Rather, it invites a different angle to questions on AI. The task is not to determine what remains constant and what genuinely differs from earlier periods of technological change, but to identify how prior knowledge applies to both unprecedented and familiar change. By examining the lessons generated through previous waves of technological transformation, organizational change scholars can develop a more balanced understanding of AI one that recognizes both its novel capabilities and its place within a longer history of technological disruption, organizational adaptation, and social sensemaking. This perspective suggests that before asking what AI changes and its meaning, it is useful to first consider what organizational scholars already know about how organizations

and individuals respond to technological change. Doing so provides an important basis now and going forward for distinguishing genuinely new challenges from enduring tensions that have accompanied technological innovation for generations.

Perhaps the most enduring contribution from an organizational perspective comes from socio-technical systems theory. Originating in studies of technological change in the British coal mining industry, socio-technical scholars argued that organizational outcomes cannot be understood by examining technical systems in isolation (Cummings, 1978). Rather, technologies and social systems are mutually dependent, with organizational effectiveness emerging from the joint optimization of technical arrangements and social structures (Pasmore et al., 1982; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). This perspective challenged technologically deterministic assumptions by demonstrating that the success or failure of new technologies depends as much on work design, skills, relationships, identities, power structures, and patterns of coordination as on the technologies themselves. Subsequent research reinforced this insight, showing that technologies are not simply implemented but actively interpreted, adapted, and enacted by those who use them (Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001). From this perspective, the organizational consequences of AI are unlikely to be determined solely by the sophistication of algorithms or advances in computational capability. Instead, outcomes will depend on how organizations redesign jobs, distribute expertise, develop new capabilities, establish governance mechanisms, and negotiate evolving relationships between humans and intelligent systems. Using this foundation, AI therefore represents not simply a technical change, but a socio-technical one, challenging the balance and alignment between technological possibilities and the social systems within which they are embedded.

Research on technology and organizational structure similarly cautions against universal claims regarding unidirectional technological impacts. Early contingency theorists argued that there is no single best way to organize and that the effectiveness of organizational structures depends on the fit between organizational arrangements and contextual conditions, including technology, uncertainty, interdependence, and task complexity (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Woodward, 1965). One of the central insights emerging from this tradition is that technologies do not produce uniform organizational outcomes. Rather, the consequences of technological change are contingent upon how technologies interact with existing structures, processes, environments, and patterns of work. Subsequent research reinforced this view, demonstrating that organizations frequently adapt, reinterpret, and modify technologies in ways that diverge from their intended design, leading similar technologies to generate markedly different outcomes across contexts (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski, 1992). From this perspective, contemporary claims that AI will inevitably and universally transform organizations (and in a particular direction) should be treated with caution. While AI may introduce powerful new capabilities, decades of organizational research suggest that technological outcomes are rarely predetermined. Instead, they emerge through processes of experimentation, adaptation, negotiation, and sensemaking as organizations seek to integrate new technologies into existing social and

institutional arrangements, a process which may also change the technology itself. The future organizational consequences of AI are therefore likely to be contingent as much on context and implementation as on the development of the technology itself.

A further lesson emerges from sociological studies of work and workplace change. Across labor process theory, the sociology of work, and studies of technological transformation, scholars have consistently examined how new technologies reshape the content, control, and organization of work rather than simply their technical characteristics (see Barley, 1986; Braverman, 1974; Zuboff, 1988). A central insight from this tradition is that technological innovation rarely produces straightforward outcomes. Instead, new technologies often trigger competing and uneven processes of deskilling and reskilling, job displacement and job creation, worker empowerment and surveillance, and the redistribution and rebalancing of expertise and authority. Similar concerns accompanied mechanization, automation, computerization, and digitalization, each generating predictions regarding the future of work and the place of human labor within it (see Hirschhorn, 1984). While some of these concerns were realized, technological change also frequently generated unexpected occupational adaptations, new forms of expertise, and entirely new categories of work (Autor et al., 2003; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Taken together, historical experience suggests that technological change often transforms work more than it eliminates it. This observation does not diminish contemporary concerns regarding AI-driven labor market disruption. Rather, it encourages greater analytical precision regarding who is affected, which forms of work are transformed, how expertise is redistributed and redefined, and the conditions under which particular outcomes emerge. The implications of AI are therefore unlikely to be uniform across occupations, industries, or institutional settings; instead, they will be mediated by the social, organizational, and political contexts in which AI is adopted and used.

Theoretical perspectives such as structuration theory and the duality of technology further challenge deterministic understandings of technological change. Drawing on Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, scholars have argued that technologies are simultaneously enabling and constraining: they shape human action while also being shaped by the actions of those who design, interpret, and use them (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 1992). Rather than exerting fixed effects, technologies become meaningful through processes of enactment and practice, with organizational actors appropriating, adapting, and sometimes resisting technical systems in ways that often diverge from their intended purposes. This perspective shifts attention away from what technologies are presumed to do toward how they become embedded in everyday organizational life. Research consistently demonstrates that technological consequences emerge through the interaction between material capabilities and human agency, making organizational outcomes inherently variable rather than predetermined (Avolio et al., 2000; Orlikowski, 2000; Leonardi, 2011). Seen this way, AI systems may appear technologically autonomous, yet their organizational effects remain deeply shaped by managerial priorities, organizational routines, governance arrangements, regulatory environments, and broader institutional contexts.

Understanding AI therefore requires examining not only what the technology can do, but also how individuals and organizations choose to narrate, use, govern, resist, modify, and redefine it. In this sense, AI is not simply an independent driver of organizational change but part of an ongoing interactive process through which technologies and social systems mutually constitute one another.

What changes across eras is often not the substance of ongoing debates, but the technologies around which they are organized. AI therefore represents not only a technological phenomenon but also the latest manifestation of a recurring theme through which societies project hopes, fears, and expectations about the future (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). The language may have evolved, and the technologies themselves may be more sophisticated, but the underlying narratives of transformation, disruption, opportunity, and risk remain remarkably familiar. What appears distinctive today is less the existence of these narratives than the unprecedented speed with which they circulate and the scale of public attention they attract.

The lessons from these historical traditions are neither complacency nor reassurance. It is perspective. AI may introduce novel capabilities and unprecedented challenges, but organizational scholars are not confronting technological change for the first time. Existing theories of socio-technical systems, workplace transformation, organizational adaptation, and technological governance provide a substantial foundation from which to begin. Ignoring these insights risks rediscovering lessons already learned. The more productive task is to identify which existing assumptions remain useful, which require revision, and where genuinely new conceptual tools and empirical knowledge may be needed. It is to that question, on the possibility that some aspects of AI may indeed lead change differently from earlier technologies enough to challenge both organizational change practice and scholarship.

The Present Challenge: What May Actually Be Different?

Recognizing continuity and cautioning against technological exceptionalism does not imply that AI is simply another technological innovation, predictable from past experience. AI does introduce innovative characteristics that may challenge foundational assumptions within organizational change theory and require revised or even new theory and methodology.

Compared to previous waves of digitalization, generative AI and modern foundation models distinguish themselves by qualitatively different qualities. Previous digital technologies automated routine tasks, executed explicit rules, supported human decisions, replaced labor, were based on static rules and software, and demonstrated predictable behavior. However, the characteristics of AI allow for performing non-routine cognitive work (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025), producing plausible context-dependent outputs (Plesner & Justesen, 2025), becoming an active collaborator or agent (e.g., in decision making) (Jarrahi, 2018), augmenting cognition and knowledge work (Dell'Acqua et al., 2026), continuously learning and improving through interaction (Bailey & Barley, 2020), and even demonstrating emergent and sometimes

unpredictable behavior (Bailey et al., 2022). Together, these characteristics reshape organizational change along several dimensions at once:

- the logic of change: probabilistic rather than deterministic
- the agent of change: human or non-human
- the process of change: adaptation rather than implementation
- technology application: dynamic rather than linear
- the content of change: automation of knowledge rather than kinesthetics
- the transparency of change: invisible and non-traceable rather than open and transparent
- the power of change: a shift in the hierarchy of change agency
- change competencies: knowing when to trust technology or knowledge, rather than knowing how to use it

In managing change, one major focus for both research and practice has been the reduction of uncertainty, the methods for which have all related to management and leadership (Bordia et al., 2004). However, with the introduction of AI, the nature of change uncertainty itself seems to transform. AI does not merely reduce informational uncertainty; it simultaneously increases epistemic uncertainty by rendering the organizational processes opaque (Faraj et al., 2022), therefore potentially requiring alternative theories and methodologies.

When AI changes the nature of change itself, more general questions associated with human judgement and expertise arise. When contemporary AI systems operate through processes sufficiently complex and impervious, organizational actors cannot easily trace how particular outputs have been produced. Although these systems expand the capacity of organizations to analyze large volumes of data and potentially strengthen data-informed decision-making, they also generate unprecedented amounts of noise and nonsense alongside useful knowledge. The organizational challenge therefore shifts from merely accessing information to judging whether AI-generated outputs are plausible, relevant, and sufficiently reliable to inform action.

Such judgments become increasingly difficult as the human evaluator's substantive expertise becomes insufficient or irrelevant. Generative AI exacerbates this problem because linguistic fluency can create an appearance of authority. Inaccurate claims, weak reasoning, or fabricated information may be expressed in highly plausible, often elaborate prose. Organizational actors must therefore develop not only the competence to use AI, but the capacity to distinguish signal from noise, substance from sophistry, and credible expertise from merely credible-sounding content. The characteristic of AI-led and AI-generated change creates a distinctive form of epistemic uncertainty for organizational change. As AI increasingly participates in knowledge production, analysis, and decision-making, established relationships between expertise, evidence, authority, judgement, and accountability may become less clear. The central question becomes not simply what is true, but how organizational actors determine what can reasonably be treated as true when the processes generating a claim are opaque and

those evaluating it may lack the expertise necessary to assess it. AI may therefore produce an unusual asymmetry between the apparent confidence of knowledge and our capacity to verify it. This has important implications for how change is organized, how expertise and authority are distributed, and how responsibility and accountability are allocated when AI-generated knowledge informs organizational action.

Our perceptions of technology seem to alter as our interaction with AI shifts from using to collaborating with technology. Through human-AI and AI-AI collectives, technology becomes part of organizational cognition, moving towards being a teammate, advisor, or organizational participant rather than merely infrastructure. Organizations are therefore no longer solely changing because technology changes work—they are changing because technology increasingly becomes an agentic organizational actor itself. Consequently, work and occupational boundaries are reshaped, and novel forms of coordination and control emerge (Faraj et al., 2018). The differences associated with AI raise new questions about agency, accountability, intentionality, ethics, and governance in organizational change, the impact of which may evolve at all organizational levels and in unforeseen ways.

Looking Forward: Learning From Futures Thinking Rather Than Predicting the Future

If AI fundamentally alters how organizations create value, coordinate work, and adapt over time, then theories built primarily on previous waves of technological change may become necessary but insufficient. Similarly, empirical evidence derived from past organizational transformations may have limited capacity to explain new organizational forms and challenges that are in the process of materializing. Indeed, organizational change scholars may need to complement traditional change theories, empirical knowledge, and methods with prospective theories and methodologies. Futures-oriented approaches offer ways of systematically exploring developments and of examining how different assumptions about technological evolution may shape organizational trajectories. Instead of asking only *what has changed?*, these approaches encourage scholars to ask *what could change, under what conditions, and with which organizational consequences?*

An important lesson from the tradition of futurism and technological forecasting is that debates surrounding AI are not entirely new. Across successive waves of technological change, scholars and futurists have anticipated transformations in economies, societies, work, and everyday life, often combining utopian visions of opportunity with dystopian concerns regarding displacement, control, and disruption (Naisbitt, 1982; Toffler, 1970, 1980). Questions surrounding automation, machine-driven unemployment, human obsolescence, and post-work futures therefore long predate contemporary discussions of artificial intelligence (Bell, 1973). What is distinctive today may be less the substance of these debates than the speed, scale, and visibility with which they circulate. This observation reinforces the value of futures-oriented approaches, not

because they predict what will happen, but because they help us systematically explore what could happen and why.

The rich tradition of futures research provides methodologies that could substantially enrich organizational change scholarship. Strategic foresight (e.g., Battistella & De Toni, 2011; Iden et al., 2017) offers structured processes for identifying weak signals, emerging trends, and potential discontinuities. Scenario planning (e.g., Amer et al., 2013; Cordova-Pozo & Rouwette, 2023) enables researchers to develop multiple futures rather than relying on single-point predictions, thereby examining how organizations might respond under different technological, institutional, and societal conditions. Science fiction prototyping (e.g., Szollosy, 2024) uses carefully constructed narratives to surface implicit assumptions, explore second- and third-order consequences of emerging technologies, and stimulate theoretical imagination. Likewise, positive futures and alternative imaginaries push scholars to move beyond dystopian or deterministic accounts of AI by envisioning desirable organizational futures and the pathways through which they might be realized.

These approaches have long been employed within futures studies to investigate technological and societal transformations before their full implications become apparent (e.g., Bell, 1997; Inayatullah, 1998; Miller, 2007). Yet they remain relatively underutilized in organizational change research. AI presents an opportunity to broaden this methodological repertoire. Because generative and agentic AI are rapidly evolving and their organizational consequences are still unfolding, futures-oriented methods can complement conventional empirical research by systematically exploring plausible developments and changes. Importantly, the purpose of these approaches is not prediction. Rather, they help scholars challenge existing assumptions, expand theoretical imagination, identify emerging research questions, and develop concepts that can later be subjected to empirical scrutiny. In this sense, futures-oriented methods can function as theory-generating tools, enabling organizational change scholars to investigate the implications and processes of AI before the full organizational reality has stabilized. Such an orientation may prove increasingly important if AI continues to evolve more rapidly than the theories and empirical evidence traditionally used to explain organizational change.

Futures methods are not merely supplemental research methods. They are epistemologically different frameworks focusing on which plausible empirical changes theory should prepare us to explain. As AI compresses the lag between technological innovation and organizational transformation, making exclusive reliance on retrospective theorizing and methodologies seems increasingly limiting. Organizational change scholarship could benefit from embracing the dual epistemology of, on the one hand, explaining observed change and, on the other, systematically theorizing the prospect of change.

A Productive Research Agenda: Between Historical Amnesia and Technological Exceptionality

The challenge facing organizational change scholarship in understanding AI-led and AI-generated change is twofold. One risk is historical amnesia: a failure to

recover and apply the substantial body of knowledge accumulated through decades of research on technology, organizational change, work, and adaptation. The second risk is technological exceptionalism: assuming the novelty of AI before establishing empirically and theoretically which of its characteristics are genuinely different, why those differences matter, and whether existing explanations remain adequate. Avoiding both errors requires neither blind reliance on past knowledge nor uncritical celebration of novelty, but careful investigation of the boundary between continuity and disruption. The central task is therefore to determine which historical knowledge remains useful, how it can be translated into current and future changes, where it becomes insufficient, and where new theoretical and methodological tools are required.

In the current move from AI teenage to adulthood, organizational change scholarship has a lot to offer. The introduction of AI in organizations opens up new questions, and a productive research agenda could start with the following non-exhaustive list of themes to be investigated and theorized by organizational change scholars:

1. Human–AI co-evolution: How do organizations and AI capabilities adapt to one another over time, rather than treating AI as a fixed intervention or linear implementation?
2. Distributed agency and decision-making: How should agency, accountability, and responsibility be theorized when decisions emerge from interactions among humans, AI systems, and organizational routines?
3. Transformation of organizational knowledge: How is the creation, storage, sharing, and application of knowledge altered, and what new capabilities become strategically important?
4. Identity and sensemaking: How do professionals reconstruct their identities and make sense of organizational change when AI assumes parts of traditionally human cognitive work?
5. AI-enabled organizational routines: How are routines created, stabilized, and changed when AI participates in execution, coordination, and learning?
6. Epistemic change capability: How do organizations develop the capability to assess when AI-generated outputs should be trusted, questioned, or rejected, and how does this reshape change competence from knowing how to use technology toward knowing when, where, and on what basis to rely on it?
7. Prospective change capability: How can organizational change scholarship complement its capacity to explain observed change with the capability to systematically theorize plausible change, using futures-oriented approaches to examine what could change, under what conditions, and with which organizational consequences?
8. Methodological innovation: How can scholars combine qualitative process research, digital trace data, experiments, and computational methods to study organizational change in real time?

Forgotten Past or Sci-Fi Future? Useful Organizational Change Research

AI may transform organizations and the nature of organizational change in profound ways. Yet the organizational challenge of responding to technological change is itself a familiar one. Understanding AI-led and AI-generated change requires both historical cognizance and future-oriented imagination. The field must learn from what it knows, acknowledge what it does not know, and resist the temptation to treat either continuity or novelty as settled assumptions. So: forgotten past, or sci-fi future? The honest answer is neither. The more useful question is where the two claims quietly agree. The scholar who insists "we have seen all this before" and the one who insists "nothing we know applies" are both making a bet about how much of the past is still load-bearing. That bet is answerable, not by settling it in advance, but by treating it as an empirical *and* theoretical question. The provocation of this Forum is therefore not merely that organizational change scholars should study AI. It is that AI should compel us to reconsider how we study change when the technology is no longer only the object, context, or instrument of change, but may also participate in producing its direction, content, and consequences. If change scholarship cannot distinguish what is familiar from what is genuinely different, other fields will define the meaning of AI-led change for us. Our challenge is to ensure that they do not do so without the organizational, human, and historical knowledge that this field uniquely brings. In *Back to the Future,* Doc Brown built his time machine from the tools and materials of his own era, and it still caught him off guard. Organizational change scholarship faces a comparable risk with AI: the theories we already hold may turn out to be exactly right, exactly wrong, or right about the wrong parts, but we will not find out which by assuming any of the three in advance.

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