

FROM ANXIETY TO ADAPTATION: PSYCAP AS A BUFFER AGAINST AI-INDUCED JOB ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Widespread workplace adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) accelerates digital transformation but fuels intense AI-induced job anxiety, which in turn stalls organizational adaptation. While current business management literature focuses heavily on macro-economic outcomes, the micro-level psychological resources of employees remain under-researched. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Psychological Capital (PsyCap) — comprising hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism (HERO) — acts as a critical strategic buffer against technological displacement fears.

Methods: We synthesize Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Cognitive Appraisal Theory to build a robust conceptual framework. Rather than relying on static empirical datasets, the paper employs deductive theoretical modeling to position PsyCap as a dynamic moderating variable that shapes how workers psychologically appraise and react to AI disruptions.

Results: The framework establishes three distinct micro-level adaptive responses. First, optimism and resilience enable the cognitive reframing of technological shifts as temporary transitions. Second, hope drives proactive skill redeployment through lateral thinking. Finally, a resilience–efficacy synergy fosters professional identity elasticity, allowing employees to redefine their workplace value rather than resisting automation.

Conclusions: PsyCap serves as an essential institutional asset for enterprise survival during automation transitions. To operationalize these insights, the paper introduces actionable managerial frameworks including PsyCap audit tools, structured mentorship models and psychologically embedded “reskilling sabbaticals.” Shifting focus from pure technical upskilling toward psychological adaptability provides organizational leaders with a sustainable, human-centered blueprint for AI readiness.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; AI-induced Job Anxiety; Psychological Capital; Adaptive Responses; Reskilling.

JEL: M12, J24, O33, D91

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally reshaping the world of work. With the proliferation of AI-driven automation, concerns about job security have intensified across industries. Estimates project that by 2030, AI and automation will displace 92 million jobs globally while creating 170 million new roles, amounting to a 22% structural churn across the formal labour market, with disproportionate effects on roles in finance, customer service and manufacturing (World Economic Forum, 2025). Crucially, this disruption is no longer confined to routine occupations: task-level exposure analyses indicate that around 80% of the U.S. workforce could see at least 10% of their tasks affected by large language models, with approximately 19% facing changes to at least half of their tasks, and higher-income cognitive roles facing comparatively greater exposure (Eloundou et al., 2024). The psychological impact of AI-related employment disruption is therefore emerging as a critical issue, raising questions about how employees perceive and respond to automation-driven career uncertainty.

Beyond job loss, AI disrupts traditional employment structures, redefining roles, skill requirements and career trajectories. Employees in high-exposure sectors experience heightened career anxiety, reduced job satisfaction and increased stress levels (Kim et al., 2024). AI-related job insecurity can also lead to counterproductive workplace behaviours, such as knowledge hiding and reduced engagement (Kim et al., 2024). However, while the economic and skill-related aspects of AI job displacement have been widely studied, the psychological dimensions remain underexplored.

This paper addresses that gap by conceptualizing the mechanisms through which Psychological Capital (PsyCap) moderates AI-induced job anxiety. Integrating insights from organizational behaviour, positive psychology and workforce-automation research, the study proposes a theoretical framework explaining how the HERO components of PsyCap — hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism — act as psychological buffers against the uncertainties posed by AI, and translates this framework into managerial interventions for human-centered AI readiness.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence across industries has ushered in a new era of technological unemployment, creating waves of uncertainty in the global labour market. This displacement tends to occur in phases, initially affecting roles with repetitive, routine tasks such as data entry, customer service and manufacturing line work, and gradually extending into more cognitively demanding roles such as journalism, legal research and diagnostics (Brougham & Haar, 2018; Manyika et al., 2017). Recent evidence indicates that the post-ChatGPT wave of generative AI has begun penetrating precisely those cognitive and creative domains once considered insulated, with knowledge workers reporting concerns around deskilling, dehumanisation and identity loss as generative AI tools enter scientific, analytical and creative workflows (Autor, Mindell, & Reynolds, 2020; Wagman, Dearing, & Chetty, 2025). The extent of this vulnerability varies by industry: high-risk sectors such as retail, manufacturing and logistics face imminent disruption, while education, healthcare and other semi-cognitive roles experience more measured change through AI augmentation rather than outright replacement (Arntz, Gregory, & Zierahn, 2016). The unique challenge of this transition is not just technological but deeply psychological, especially as it relates to employees' sense of professional identity, future security and employability.

1.1. AI-Induced Job Anxiety and Its Behavioural Manifestations at Work

AI-induced job anxiety can manifest in multiple ways, ranging from financial insecurity to existential fears about professional identity loss (Brougham & Haar, 2020). Employees who witness colleagues being replaced by AI-driven systems experience secondary trauma, leading to declining workplace morale, increased turnover intentions and reduced innovation (Caporusso, 2023). Research has also linked AI-related job anxiety to burnout and workplace incivility, highlighting its far-reaching implications for employee well-being and organizational culture (Kim et al., 2024).

Although related constructs such as AI-induced job insecurity (Kim & Kim, 2024), AI anxiety (Wang & Wang, 2022) and STARA awareness — employees' awareness of Smart Technology, Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Algorithms (Brougham & Haar, 2018) — capture perceptions of technological threat and automation-related uncertainty, the present paper focuses more specifically on the affective experience of AI-induced job anxiety. AI-induced job anxiety is understood here as anticipatory fear, emotional strain and perceived uncertainty regarding the potential impact of AI on one's future employability, professional identity and career continuity. This distinction matters because employees may experience significant psychological distress even in the absence of actual job displacement or formal insecurity signals.

Behaviourally, these anxieties translate into defensive workplace responses. Employees may engage in career hedging, deliberately avoiding investment in future-oriented skills due to uncertainty about which competencies will remain relevant (Kim et al., 2024). Other behaviours include resistance to digital upskilling, decreased engagement and withdrawal from organizational initiatives related to AI adoption (Yang, 2024). Recent systematic reviews corroborate this picture, showing that employees experiencing AI-driven job insecurity often become hesitant or actively resistant to acquiring advanced skills, and report heightened anxiety about human–AI collaborative learning, which in turn dampens work engagement and informal field-based learning (Bankins et al., 2024; Jia et al., 2025).

Drawing from Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which suggests that employees strive to protect their job-related resources (Hobfoll, 1989), it is evident that AI-related employment uncertainty triggers defensive coping mechanisms. Yet such adverse outcomes should not be viewed as inevitable. Individuals differ considerably in how they respond to stressful and uncertain circumstances, with some becoming overwhelmed by perceived threats while others demonstrate adaptive coping and resilience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). This variation suggests that the impact of AI-induced job anxiety depends not only on the nature of the perceived threat, but also on the psychological resources available to employees when confronting that threat.

1.2. Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as a Resilience Resource

Psychological Capital (PsyCap), a construct encompassing Hope, Self-Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism (HERO), has emerged as a crucial psychological resource that helps employees adapt to career uncertainty (Luthans et al., 2007). Recent studies indicate that PsyCap positively correlates with career satisfaction, stress tolerance and adaptive responses to workplace change (Zyberaj & Bakaç, 2022). Employees with high PsyCap are more likely to reframe AI-related career uncertainty as an opportunity for growth, demonstrate proactive skill adaptation and maintain a positive outlook toward AI-driven transitions (Kadiyono & Pardosi, 2023). Nonetheless, there is a critical gap in understanding how PsyCap specifically buffers AI-induced job anxiety across industries and cultural contexts (Kim & Kim, 2024).

Each component contributes uniquely: hope enables individuals to generate and pursue alternative career pathways when facing uncertainty; self-efficacy provides the confidence to master AI-related skills and adapt to changing job demands (Wang & Wang, 2022); resilience allows employees to bounce back from career setbacks and preserve their professional identity amid AI-driven shifts (Zyberaj & Bakaç, 2022); and optimism supports a forward-looking mindset that perceives AI transitions as manageable rather than catastrophic (Chen et al., 2024). A recent twenty-five-year synthesis of PsyCap research confirms that PsyCap interventions consistently produce gains in positivity and a wide range of desirable work outcomes across diverse populations, supporting its treatment as a malleable, developable resource rather than a fixed trait (Youssef-Morgan, 2024).

1.3. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and PsyCap's Buffering Role

The conceptual relevance of PsyCap is reinforced through Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that individuals strive to acquire, maintain and protect valuable resources when facing stress. AI-induced job displacement, or even an anticipatory fear of such displacement, threatens core professional resources such as status, stability and competence, and the loss or threat of these resources can result in psychological depletion or disengagement.

In this framework, PsyCap functions as a “resource caravan,” equipping employees with the psychological reserves necessary to withstand career shocks and navigate transitions constructively (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Wang, 2020). Conversely, employees with low PsyCap are more prone to resource leakage, spiralling into anxiety, withdrawal and career stagnation. Empirical findings support this: employees with high PsyCap report lower job insecurity, stronger learning motivation in AI transitions and higher participation in reskilling initiatives (Wang et al., 2024; Asio & Suero, 2024). This paper extends these findings by proposing a theoretical model that positions PsyCap as a psychological buffer against AI-related career stress, integrating insights from positive psychology, organizational behaviour and labour economics.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual research design rather than an empirical one. Because the phenomenon of interest — the psychological appraisal of AI-driven career disruption — is still emerging and only partially captured by existing measurement instruments, a theory-building approach is more appropriate than hypothesis testing on static datasets. The study therefore employs deductive theoretical modeling, in which established theory is used to derive a structured set of relationships and testable propositions.

Three complementary theoretical lenses are synthesized. Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) explains why the same AI-related stressor produces divergent employee reactions, depending on how individuals appraise threat and coping capacity. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) explains why the threat or loss of professional resources generates strain, and how psychological reserves buffer that strain. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) explains how AI exposure shapes the satisfaction or frustration of the basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, thereby influencing motivation and adaptation.

Integrating these perspectives, PsyCap is modelled as a dynamic moderating variable rather than a fixed trait. The analytical procedure involved three steps: first, mapping the documented behavioural and affective manifestations of AI-induced job anxiety from the literature; second, identifying the HERO components of PsyCap as candidate buffering

resources; and third, theorizing the specific adaptive pathways through which these resources alter employees' appraisal of, and response to, AI disruption. The resulting framework and propositions are presented in the following section.

3. RESULTS: THE PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Core Conceptual Proposition and Framework

Psychological Capital (PsyCap) moderates the relationship between AI-induced job anxiety and adaptive career responses by influencing how employees interpret and cope with technological uncertainty and perceived career disruption. In an increasingly AI-mediated workplace, employees face not only technological uncertainty but also deep psychological disruption. The framework proposes that PsyCap serves as a psychological buffer between AI exposure and adaptive career responses, primarily by altering how individuals appraise anxiety and by enabling resilience-driven action.

Drawing on Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), individuals evaluate potential stressors based on perceived control and available resources. In the context of AI adoption, employees assess whether technological change threatens job continuity or represents an opportunity for skill growth. Those who interpret AI as a threat are more likely to experience psychological strain, while those with sufficient psychological resources may respond with adaptability and optimism. PsyCap acts as a resource reservoir that enables individuals to reframe AI-related uncertainty as manageable or even growth-enabling: hope provides the mental scaffolding for identifying alternate career pathways, efficacy boosts belief in one's ability to upskill, resilience supports recovery from setbacks and identity loss, and optimism reduces catastrophic thinking, replacing it with a belief in labour-market fluidity (Chen et al., 2024; Wang & Wang, 2022).

The framework is further supported by COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989): perceived AI-related career threat can deplete employees' emotional and professional reserves, but those with high PsyCap can activate a "resource caravan," mitigating leakage and building resource gains, thereby sustaining adaptive behaviour in disrupted work environments (Luthans et al., 2020). Importantly, recent COR-grounded evidence suggests this buffering effect may be non-linear: Liu and Ye (2026) report an inverted-U relationship in which employees with moderate self-efficacy experience the strongest AI-induced job insecurity — because they appraise the threat as real but doubt their capacity to absorb it — whereas those at the high end of the efficacy distribution show the most resilient performance trajectories. This pattern reinforces the case for treating PsyCap as a configural resource rather than a simple linear moderator.

Rather than eliminating anxiety itself, higher levels of PsyCap increase the likelihood of adaptive career responses in the face of technological uncertainty. These adaptive responses manifest through three interrelated psychological patterns. First, cognitive reframing: optimism and resilience enable individuals to reinterpret AI-driven disruption not as an existential threat but as a transitional phase that may create opportunities for reinvention and growth (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Second, skill redeployment: hope facilitates future-oriented, flexible thinking, helping individuals recognize transferable competencies and align them with emerging AI-adjacent roles, reflecting broader processes of career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Third, professional identity adaptability: a combination of resilience and efficacy supports individuals in maintaining a stable sense of professional identity even as roles evolve, facilitating adaptive professional adjustment during workplace transition (Ibarra, 1999).

The framework can also be anchored in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which holds that work contexts influence motivation and adaptation primarily through their impact on the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Recent SDT scholarship extends this lens to technological change, arguing that as innovations reshape job design, the resulting uncertainty and interdependence shape worker motivation, performance and well-being (Gagné et al., 2022). When employees interpret AI exposure through an anxiety-laden appraisal, it signals frustration of core needs — particularly competence and autonomy — which SDT associates with controlled motivation, defensive coping and lower well-being. Conversely, when AI exposure is experienced as a challenge compatible with one's sense of agency and capability, it provides a platform for more autonomous motivation and constructive adjustment. Within this needs-based view, PsyCap functions as a critical personal resource shaping how individuals metabolize AI-related demands into adaptive responses, consistent with SDT's notion of internalization.

Among the HERO dimensions, self-efficacy and resilience appear particularly relevant in enabling employees to navigate AI-driven professional disruption. Self-efficacy enhances confidence in managing evolving technological demands and acquiring new competencies (Bandura, 1997), whereas resilience facilitates psychological adjustment and continuity amid uncertainty and occupational change (Luthans et al., 2007). However, the framework does not treat these dimensions as isolated; rather, their adaptive influence is understood within the broader synergistic structure of PsyCap, where hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism interact dynamically to shape employee responses to workplace disruption.

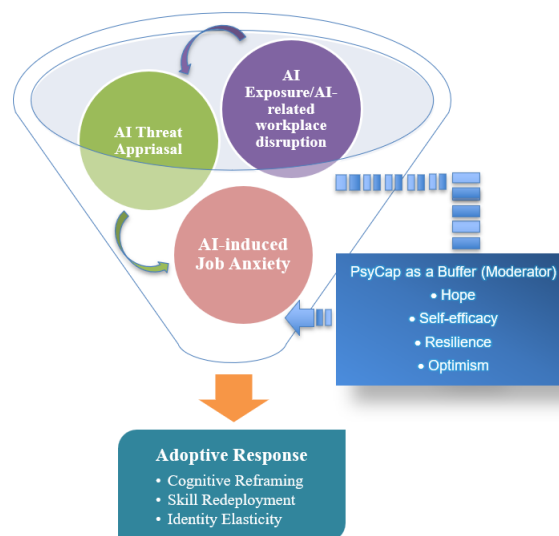


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model: PsyCap as a Moderating Resource in AI-Induced Job Anxiety

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

3.2. Propositions

Based on the preceding framework (Figure 1), the following testable propositions are advanced to guide future empirical inquiry:

Proposition 1: AI exposure will be positively associated with employees' job anxiety, especially in sectors with high automation susceptibility.

Proposition 2: Psychological Capital (PsyCap) will moderate the relationship between AI-induced job anxiety and adaptive career responses, such as cognitive reframing, skill redeployment and professional identity adaptation.

Proposition 3: Among the HERO components of PsyCap, self-efficacy and resilience will have the strongest influence in enabling employees to maintain a coherent professional identity amid AI-driven role disruption.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Practical Implications

As AI continues to reshape the contours of modern work, organizations must expand their transformation strategies beyond technological infrastructure to include psychological infrastructure. This paper underscores the role of PsyCap in enabling employees to cope with AI-induced job anxiety and offers several practical interventions that translate conceptual insights into workplace readiness.

A foundational step is the implementation of PsyCap audit tools to map workforce vulnerability. These diagnostic instruments assess the HERO components across departments and job roles, helping identify at-risk employee groups in automation-prone domains and enabling organizations to allocate reskilling resources more strategically. Organizations that integrate psychological profiling into their change-management processes report significantly higher adaptability among staff (Zyberaj & Bakaç, 2022).

A second avenue is the development of AI transition mentorship programmes, in which employees with high PsyCap are paired with those exhibiting lower levels of psychological resources. Drawing on Bandura's (1977) theory of role modeling, such programmes promote psychological safety, normalize adaptive behaviour and facilitate mutual learning during AI adoption. Kim et al. (2024) found that peer-based resilience-diffusion mechanisms significantly reduce disengagement and anxiety-related resistance. Building on the job demands-resources tradition, recent evidence on "co-skilling" initiatives suggests that collaborative AI training workshops — in which employees model adaptive behaviours, share coping strategies and receive structured feedback — materially reinforce self-efficacy and adaptability in AI-integrated workplaces (Zhang et al., 2025).

At the policy level, organizations and governments should explore the institutionalization of "reskilling sabbaticals" — structured breaks from routine work that combine technical skill acquisition with psychological development, including certification in AI-adjacent competencies alongside workshops on goal-setting, self-efficacy building and identity resilience. Asio and Suero (2024) argue that integrating psychological development into AI-readiness programmes enhances learning motivation and self-confidence, particularly among mid-career professionals. Such programmes need not be resource-intensive: Shi and Sin (2024) demonstrate in a randomised controlled trial that brief, web-based PsyCap training significantly enhances participants' self-efficacy, hope and optimism, suggesting that scalable digital delivery is a viable route for embedding PsyCap development inside large reskilling initiatives.

Organizations should also consider embedding anxiety-mitigation metrics into their AI rollout strategies. Rather than relying solely on adoption rates or productivity indicators, these metrics could include pre- and post-intervention PsyCap scores, employee stress assessments and participation rates in psychological support services. Wang et al. (2024) recommend that such well-being indicators be reported alongside technological KPIs to foster more holistic, human-centered digital transformation. From a strategic standpoint, investment

in PsyCap development is not merely ethical leadership but economically rational: Luthans et al. (2020) and Wang & Wang (2022) show that organizations with higher collective PsyCap enjoy lower attrition, faster AI-tool adoption and stronger innovation capabilities. PsyCap therefore emerges not only as a psychological shield but as a strategic asset capable of generating long-term workforce sustainability and competitive advantage.

Table 1
Levels of PsyCap Development Interventions

Level of Intervention	PsyCap Strategy	Key Activities / Tools	Outcome
Individual	Build PsyCap (HERO)	Reskilling sabbaticals; PsyCap training; self-efficacy coaching	Skill adaptation; confidence; psychological readiness
Peer / Team	Spread PsyCap	AI transition mentorships; peer learning circles	Supportive culture; anxiety reduction; motivation
Organizational	Diagnose & measure PsyCap	PsyCap audits; anxiety-mitigation metrics; policy design	Strategic resilience; informed AI rollout; holistic readiness

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

4.2. Future Research Directions

To build on this conceptual foundation, two directions for future inquiry are proposed. First, longitudinal studies of PsyCap cultivation across career domains could explore how PsyCap evolves over time in response to AI-induced change — for instance, whether STEM professionals rely more on self-efficacy-driven adaptation while creative professionals draw more from hope and optimism. Longitudinal mixed-method studies tracking PsyCap development during AI-implementation phases in both creative and technical sectors could reveal differential resilience pathways and inform customized interventions (Asio & Suero, 2024).

Second, human-centric AI tool design incorporating PsyCap preservation represents a promising area. Just as emotional intelligence is being built into conversational AI systems, future AI interfaces could be designed with features that encourage user optimism, support skill learning (efficacy) and prompt resilience through feedback loops. Interdisciplinary teams of organizational psychologists, AI developers and user-experience designers could co-develop AI tools that serve not only functional but also psychological needs (Chen et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

In an age where technological disruption is inevitable but psychological devastation is not, the role of Psychological Capital becomes all the more urgent and indispensable. By investing in PsyCap cultivation, organizations can transform fear into forward momentum,

displacement into development and anxiety into agency. Rather than merely preparing employees for the future of work, PsyCap empowers them to help shape it — with hope in their vision, resilience in their stride, efficacy in their hands and optimism in their hearts. The conceptual framework advanced here reframes psychological adaptability, rather than technical upskilling alone, as the foundation of sustainable, human-centered AI readiness, and offers organizational leaders a tractable agenda of audit tools, mentorship models and reskilling sabbaticals through which to operationalize it.

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