



An MBA Is More Valuable Than Ever in the Age of AI



By **Andrew Knight**

WashU Olin Business School Bank of America
Professor, Senior Advisor to the Chancellor, and
Executive Director of the Bauer Leaders Academy

An MBA Is More Valuable Than Ever in the Age of AI



As AI adoption hits critical mass, employer data show “soft skills” — not technical ones — holding strong on the list of must-have skills for career longevity.

By Andrew Knight, WashU Olin Business School Bank of America Professor, Senior Advisor to the Chancellor, and Executive Director of the Bauer Leaders Academy

A paradoxical trend is emerging as companies race to integrate artificial intelligence into every facet of their business, from sales and customer service to logistics and finance: Rather than declining in value and importance, “soft skills”— people’s capacity to influence, build relationships, and collaborate with one another — are more necessary now than ever before. These are the very skills that have been central to MBA programs for decades and remain so today. Even as technologies have changed, and MBA curricula have integrated new technical courses, the core of an MBA remains providing people the foundational leadership, teamwork, and communication skills that transcend time and industries.

Of course, the demand for technical proficiency in AI has seen an astounding rise, with recent workforce research from McKinsey estimating that the number of workers in occupations where AI fluency is explicitly required has grown sevenfold in just two years, from approximately 1 million in 2023 to around 7 million in 2025. This spike in demand, while startling, isn’t unexpected nor unprecedented. So far, the speed with which AI is diffusing through the workplace outpaces the growth of foundational computer proficiency as a necessary skill for workers throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

But while workplaces and workers both seek to rapidly increase their technical proficiency in AI, it can be easy to over-rotate, at the peril of the mid- and long-term investments that have proven to ensure organizational vitality and success. Recent data suggest that interpersonal skills are the necessary foundation for people to reap the benefits of this, like any, new technology.

... the speed with which AI is diffusing through the workplace outpaces the growth of foundational computer proficiency as a necessary skill for workers throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

According to Pew Research Center, 85% of workers believe that interpersonal skills, along with written and spoken communication, are extremely or very important for career success. Notably, this is more than double those who prioritize the ability to use AI tools or technology. Indeed, Pew data over time show that as the workplace has become more digitized, the need for social and managerial skills has grown in importance more rapidly than technical skills. From 1990 to 2018, the importance of “foundational skills,” including computer skills, rose in 64% of occupations. In comparison, the need for social skills rose in 94% of occupations, and the need for managerial skills grew in 75% of occupations.

The core curriculum for leading MBA programs leans into the essential skills organizations demand: leadership, teamwork, communication, and critical thinking. And, research has shown there are essential long-term benefits when it comes to career longevity. Namely, MBA holders have a strong track record of successful career transitions mid-career thanks to transferrable skills as well as the depth and longevity of their network connections. In the era of AI-powered work, the influence of MBAs in the workplace may matter more than ever.

... as the workplace has become more digitized, the need for social and managerial skills has grown in importance more rapidly than technical skills.

What MBAs Know: Successful AI Transformation Requires Leadership to Drive Effective Implementation

The distinction between adoption and implementation is akin to the difference between buying an exercise bike and riding it. Just buying the technology does not yield its benefits; it's when you buy and use a new technology that you realize gains. Effective leadership is needed to move from the adoption of new technology to the effective implementation of that technology.

Currently, data show that ROI on AI investments is mixed and contingent on effective leadership. In a survey of nearly 3,000 employees, the AI company Perceptyx found that "leadership-driven AI strategies" amidst AI adoption were critical for enabling teams to work effectively together. In fact, the survey showed that nearly 4 out of every 5 employees in companies with leadership-driven AI implementation thought it benefited their workplace culture. Only 1-in-10 employees in companies without an effective implementation approach believed it yielded such benefits.

Excelling in Digitally Mature Companies Requires Teamwork

In addition to enabling the effective implementation of AI, interpersonal skills are necessary for thriving in — and coping with — the ways in which AI is transforming the modern workforce. And, again, these transformations are paradoxical. On the one hand, the structure of work is becoming more team-based — particularly for companies on the digital frontier. According to a Deloitte survey, 83% of "digitally mature companies" are structured around cross-functional teams. In contrast, only 55% of early-stage or less digitally mature companies have cross-functional teams as their primary structure. This suggests that the companies most likely to implement artificial intelligence are those in which workers will need a high level of interpersonal skills to work effectively in cross-functional teams. Aligned with these findings, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found the ability to work on a team is one of the top three skills employers seek in its [Job Outlook 2025 survey](#).

... 4 out of every 5 employees in companies with leadership-driven AI implementation thought it benefited their workplace culture.

Thriving With AI Requires Emotional Intelligence

And yet, even as artificial intelligence is implemented in a team-based world, research suggests that this new technology can [produce greater social isolation and loneliness for workers](#). These effects may stem, in part, from AI communicating with humans in a less emotionally intelligent manner than would other humans. These effects also could stem, though, from AI taking over work that would have otherwise been accomplished through communication and collaboration among humans. As a result, even as the structure of work becomes more team-based, the enactment of work is changing in significant ways. [Mitigating the negative effects of loneliness on well-being requires a range of interpersonal skills — including effective relationship building, emotional regulation, and leadership.](#)

The Equation for Career Longevity

AI is disrupting the business world rapidly. Amidst the accelerating pace of change and the necessary technical skills acquisition, developing the "soft skills" that are at the center of an MBA program is a wise investment. [Recent research](#) indicates that the value of specific technical skills can be fleeting, while foundational interpersonal skills retain their value over a long period of time. According to this research, the "half-life" of technical skills has dropped from 10 years in the 1980s to less than 4 years today. This means that an investment in sharpening the skills needed to collaborate with and lead others will pay off across one's career lifespan; an investment in learning a specific technology, on the other hand, will require an "update" in a few years.

Artificial intelligence is a powerful new technology. But the future of work will not be a competition between humans and computers. It will be a collaboration among humans, other humans, and computers. Pairing a mastery of technology with time-tested leadership and interpersonal skills — dual competencies at the center of leading MBA programs — is what will distinguish business leaders and make this collaboration possible.

**But the future of work will not be a competition between humans and computers.
It will be a collaboration among humans, other humans, and computers.**