redefine ALLIANCE

THE OPPORTUNITY IN FRONT OF US:
AI, Frontline Workers, and What Employment Social Enterprises are Showing the Field

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The dominant narrative of how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping work focuses on white-collar jobs, knowledge workers, and the risk of mass displacement in office-based roles. That narrative largely misses the tens of millions of Americans who do essential, physical, place-bound work that has resisted automation for decades: people who clean buildings, maintain landscapes, prepare food, operate equipment on manufacturing floors, support construction projects, and staff warehouses.

That resistance is beginning to erode. AI is arriving in these sectors — not as a single sweeping force, but through operational changes, shifting employer expectations, and new tools that are often quietly raising the bar for workers and the organizations that employ them. Workers, employers, and the systems that support them should prepare to respond.

And because these roles often serve as the first door in for workers trying to rebuild their lives, the stakes of getting this transition right are particularly high. This paper draws on emerging research and in-depth interviews with more than 20 employment social enterprise (ESE) leaders across the country to offer an honest assessment of what AI means for frontline workers and their employers — and what ESEs, other employers who intentionally hire people facing barriers, funders, and policymakers should do about it.

WHY FOCUS ON ESES?

ESEs are competitive businesses that deliberately employ people navigating the steepest barriers to stable work — histories of incarceration, experiences of homelessness, substance abuse recovery, and more. The vast majority operate in exactly the sectors described above: janitorial services, landscaping, food service, manufacturing, construction, and staffing. Redefine Alliance has long supported ESEs because they are particularly effective in helping these workers build lasting economic power over time. Today, Redefine Alliance's network includes nearly 400 ESEs employing upwards of 35,000 workers annually.

ESEs offer a uniquely valuable lens for understanding what the AI transition will mean for frontline workers broadly because of who they serve and how they operate. An ESE navigating AI adoption has to solve for everything a conventional employer does — competitive pricing, operational efficiency, workforce capability — while also supporting workers who need more than a paycheck to thrive.

If ESEs can figure out how to navigate this transition well, insights will travel: to inclusive employers across these industries, to workforce development organizations, and to policymakers designing the systems that shape how millions of Americans experience this transition. ESE workers are therefore a proxy population: the challenges they face navigating this transition are concentrated versions of what millions of frontline workers across America will encounter. What works for them matters well beyond the ESE field.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Wholesale job loss in the sectors where most ESEs operate is unlikely in the next five years. But tasks are changing before jobs do, operational expectations are rising, and the competitive landscape is shifting as firms that adopt AI tools become more efficient. Research from the Burning Glass Institute finds that automation and augmentation are not sorting jobs into separate categories, but rather that the roles experiencing the most task automation are also those seeing rising demand for higher-judgment skills. The workers who will be most valuable going forward are those who can work effectively alongside AI tools, supervise their outputs, and do so without blindly trusting them.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM ESES

The organizations we spoke with fall into three groups. A small number have leaned in deliberately and are already seeing significant results: expanded business and program capacity, better outcomes, and workers competing more effectively in the labor market. A larger group is aware and interested but not yet experimenting with enough intention to see those results. And some organizations haven't yet engaged strategically. The gap between the first group and the rest is growing, driven less by resource constraints than by a readiness to start experimenting before the picture is complete.

THE OPPORTUNITY

For ESE *businesses* competing in markets where AI-adopting competitors are becoming more efficient, early adoption is a chance to get ahead in a way the field has rarely had the opportunity to do.

And AI represents a genuine leveling force for ESE *workers* — people whose barriers have been about access and credential rather than capability. Tools that help workers draft professional communications, practice interviews, and navigate digital systems chip away at the filtering mechanisms that have historically excluded them from opportunity. Research from Opportunity@Work and Brookings finds that AI could meaningfully increase access to higher-wage roles for workers skilled through alternative routes, by closing knowledge gaps and reducing the friction that has made upward mobility so difficult. At the same time, the durable skills ESEs have always emphasized — problem-solving, adaptability, judgment, communication — are becoming more valuable in an AI-augmented labor market, not less. ESEs should say so explicitly, to workers and to employers.

THE RISK OF WAITING

ESEs that delay are likely to find competitors winning contracts they could have won, employer expectations shifting in ways their workers aren't prepared for, and a gap that compounds over time. The workers who depend on ESEs being strong, competitive employers bear the consequences of that delay too. We don't see "waiting this out" as a scenario that will end well for either party.

WHAT TO DO

- **FOR ESES:** Start with tasks rather than grand strategy. Give staff permission to experiment. Take advantage of accessible starting points — grant writing, case management, scheduling — before pursuing more complex applications. Embed AI literacy in worker training as a normal part of the program, not a special add-on. Name and defend the durable skills that AI cannot replace. And push employer partners to be intentional about how AI adoption affects job design and hiring practices.

- **FOR FUNDERS:** Create explicit room for experimentation, invest in the infrastructure for knowledge sharing across the field, and support the ESE staff who are doing the adapting alongside participant workers.

- **FOR POLICYMAKERS:** The AI moment is an opportunity to address longstanding structural failures in the publicly funded workforce system. Just adding AI-specific requirements to programs that are already under-resourced and misaligned with the workers who need them most will not work. We urge policymakers to recommit to workforce investment at a scale commensurate with the challenge, rethinking the performance metrics that incentivize serving those easiest to place over those facing the greatest barriers, and creating dedicated funding for innovation and experimentation. More specifically, we suggest establishing digital and AI literacy as a priority across publicly-funded workforce programs, updating curriculum to reflect how AI is reshaping frontline work, expanding pre-apprenticeship pathways where ESEs are particularly well-positioned, and scrutinizing the automated screening tools that are creating new barriers for workers with records and nonlinear histories.

- **REDEFINE ALLIANCE** is committed to supporting the field through this transition — through a community of practice for peer learning and shared experimentation, through updated programming and capacity building that reflects the current moment, and through a policy agenda developed in partnership with ESE leaders. The organizations already leaning in are showing what's possible — not just for other ESEs, but for the millions of workers whose path to economic stability runs through employers willing to invest in them.

PART 1: SETTING THE FRAME

Ask most people what AI means for work, and you'll hear some version of the same story: white-collar jobs under threat, entry-level coding roles disappearing, knowledge workers scrambling to stay relevant. It's a compelling narrative, and for a certain slice of the labor market, it isn't wrong. But it describes a world that most Employment social enterprise (ESE) workers don't live in.

The people ESEs exist to serve — those navigating reentry, recovery, homelessness, and other steep barriers to stable employment — mostly don't work in front of laptops. They clean commercial buildings, operate machinery, maintain city parks and green spaces, prepare and distribute food, staff warehouses, and support construction and demolition projects. Their work is physical, place-bound, and often performed in variable, unpredictable environments that have resisted automation for decades. The dominant AI narrative, focused as it is on knowledge work, largely misses them.

And yet — if you are leading an ESE today, AI is not a story happening somewhere else, to someone else's workforce. These shifts will touch ESEs. The organizations that are already leaning in are seeing results that challenge a lot of assumptions, including some of our own. And the leaders waiting for the picture to get clearer risk waiting too long.

This white paper reflects the thinking of Redefine Alliance and more than 20 ESE leaders we've spoken with in the spring of 2026 — working in food service, landscaping, street maintenance, staffing, construction, workforce development, and tech training, across communities from Camden to Los Angeles to Memphis. What we found was a field in the early stages of a reckoning: aware that something significant is happening, uncertain of the implications, and eager to gain a clearer sense for what to do about it.

A word of honesty before we go further: five-year predictions about AI are probably foolish, and anyone making them confidently deserves skepticism. We try not to do that here. What we have is a point of view developed through research and real conversations with ESE leaders. We seek to understand what's happening and what to do about it. Some of what we claim will certainly need updating sooner rather than later. We're okay with that.

WHAT WE BELIEVE, IN BRIEF:

The risks of AI for frontline ESE workers are real but often overstated. The research suggests that wholesale job loss in the sectors where most ESEs operate is unlikely in the next five years. But tasks are changing before jobs do, operational expectations are quietly rising, and the gap between organizations actively adapting and those standing still is beginning to open up in ways that will be hard to close later.

At the same time, the opportunity is significantly underappreciated. For perhaps the first time in the history of this field, ESE businesses and the workers they serve are starting from roughly the same place as their competitors. AI tools are new enough that no one has a structural head

start: the cleaning company that's been in business for thirty years doesn't know more about AI scheduling tools than an ESE that started experimenting six months ago. The credential gaps, funding gaps, and reputational gaps that ESE workers and businesses have historically fought uphill against don't translate into an AI advantage for incumbents. That's an unusual condition that ESEs should take advantage of.

The ESEs already leaning in are seeing what this makes possible: taking on work they couldn't before, serving more people with the same staff, and equipping workers with capabilities that can genuinely level the playing field against more credentialed candidates. For example, Hopeworks, a tech-training ESE headquartered in Camden, New Jersey, embedded AI tools throughout their business operations and training programs — and has since seen their young adult graduates out-compete more traditional candidates for jobs with employers. And the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) has built AI-powered voice coaching tools that make its direct service model (which serves ~9,000 returning citizens annually) substantially more scalable while also signaling an ability to positively impact the many tens of thousands of returning citizens that don't come through their doors. These represent possibilities *happening now*.

TWO THINGS WE WANT YOU TO TAKE FROM THIS PAPER.

- **FIRST:** we're cautiously optimistic. On balance, we think AI will be a net positive for both ESE workers and ESE organizations themselves. And in doing so, we subscribe neither to the "all jobs are going away" alarm nor to the "AI will solve everything" hype.

- **SECOND:** the way to engage this moment is to start engaging. Don't wait for a perfect playbook. Experiment. Learn and iterate based on what you find. The organizations already doing this are pulling ahead.

A NOTE ON WHO THIS IS FOR, AND WHAT WE MEAN BY AI

This paper is written for anyone with a stake in how frontline workers navigate the AI transition, which is a larger audience than it might initially appear. ESE leaders — executive directors, program directors, and their teams — are the primary practitioners this paper speaks to. But the evidence and arguments here are equally relevant to funders shaping what gets resourced, policymakers designing the systems that either accelerate or impede this transition, inclusive employers thinking about how to invest in their frontline workforces, and workforce development organizations trying to understand what preparing workers for the current labor market requires. We've included dedicated sections for funders and policymakers toward the end, but the broader argument runs throughout.

When we say "AI," we're using the term broadly. We mean large language models like ChatGPT and Claude that can draft, analyze, summarize, and converse. We mean automation tools embedded in scheduling software, case management platforms, and point-of-sale systems. We mean AI-enhanced robotics and smart sensors beginning to show up on job sites and in warehouses. These are meaningfully different technologies, and we try to be specific when it matters. But they're all moving in the same direction: toward more tasks being handled by

machines, more operations being shaped by data, and more premium being placed on the human judgment that sits alongside and above those systems.

This paper is not a technical implementation guide, nor a research report with a statistically representative sample. The interviews we draw on are a qualitative window into how ESE leaders are experiencing this moment. We've supplemented them with the best available external research, but we hold our conclusions with appropriate humility.

PART 2: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Before getting to what we heard from ESE leaders, it's worth looking at what the broader research shows about AI and frontline work.

AI isn't arriving in frontline ESE sectors as a single sweeping force. It's entering through tools and operational changes — smart sensors, scheduling software, purpose-built robots, predictive analytics running behind the scenes — and its effects are showing up unevenly, both across sectors and within them. Work is changing in ways that are easy to miss if you're not looking for them — and the sector-by-sector picture later in this section illustrates how varied this change looks like in practice.

Three patterns show up consistently across the sectors where ESEs operate:

→ TASKS ARE CHANGING BEFORE JOBS ARE

In nearly every sector we examined, AI is reshaping pieces of work long before it replaces entire roles. Cleaning robots still require operators. Automated food prep still requires oversight. Predictive scheduling tools still depend on people showing up to work. The more useful question isn't "which jobs disappear?" but rather which tasks are changing, in which sequence, and what that means for how workers need to be prepared.

The Stanford Digital Economy Lab found that early-career workers in highly AI-exposed occupations have experienced roughly a 16 percent relative decline in employment since the widespread adoption of generative AI — while more experienced workers in those same occupations remained stable or grew. A May 2026 analysis in MIT Technology Review describes what's happening as "the quiet weakening of the first rung of the career ladder." One plausible reading: AI is handling more of the discrete, learnable tasks that entry-level roles have traditionally been built around, compressing the on ramp in ways that are hard to see in job postings but show up in hiring outcomes. For ESEs, whose model depends on those entry-level on-ramps remaining accessible, this is worth watching closely.

A January 2026 report from the Burning Glass Institute makes a related point: the jobs experiencing the most task *automation* are largely the same jobs seeing the greatest demand for higher-judgment skills (i.e., augmentation). Automation and augmentation are reshaping the same jobs simultaneously. The project manager whose scheduling tasks AI now handles is the same project manager whose strategic responsibilities are expanding. For ESEs: break roles down by task, identify which tasks will be automated or augmented, and prepare workers accordingly.

OPERATIONS ARE SHIFTING FASTER THAN JOB TITLES

Many of the most significant AI-driven changes aren't showing up on the shop floor at all. They're showing up in how work is scheduled, monitored, priced, and coordinated — often without any formal change to job descriptions, wages, or training expectations. Employers are adopting predictive tools for demand forecasting, route optimization, preventive maintenance, and safety monitoring. The frontline worker's day may look similar on paper while the operational context around them shifts considerably.

For ESEs, this creates two risks. The first is informal role drift, where new technical or coordination responsibilities accumulate on frontline workers without corresponding training or support. The second is competitive: ESEs that aren't adopting these operational tools may find themselves at a growing cost and efficiency disadvantage relative to competitors that are (more on this later).

NEW ROLES ARE EMERGING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PHYSICAL WORK AND TECHNOLOGY

As AI and AI-enhanced robotics spread through frontline environments, demand is growing for workers who can operate, troubleshoot, monitor, and coordinate alongside these systems. These are roles that require comfort with technology, situational judgment, and the ability to problem-solve when a system doesn't do what it's supposed to. They tend to offer more stability, more interesting work, and better wages than the purely manual roles they're adjacent to. And they play to strengths — adaptive capacity, problem-solving under pressure — that ESE workers often bring in abundance.

WHERE THINGS STAND SECTOR BY SECTOR

The pace of these shifts varies considerably depending on the industry. Here's a rough bucketing, based on our research and what we're hearing from leaders (see Reference section for full list of sources):

- **Already well underway** — Commercial janitorial and manufacturing are the clearest cases. Autonomous floor-cleaning robots are now standard in airports, hospitals, and large commercial facilities. In manufacturing, robotic automation of repetitive tasks has been accelerating for years, now turbocharged by AI. But in speaking with ESEs in manufacturing specifically — like Rise Up Industries — a nuanced picture emerges. Manufacturers are still facing significant labor shortages, and AI-driven automation is largely being seen as a way to increase worker productivity rather than as grounds to replace workers. Workers are already gaining skills in robot operation, setup, and basic programming, positioning them to work alongside increasingly automated systems. And if onshoring trends make U.S. manufacturing more competitive globally, demand for workers, may actually increase over time. Neither sector is seeing mass displacement at the moment.

- **Actively transforming** — Food service and staffing are in the middle of significant operational shifts. Large-scale food distribution and fast-casual chains are deploying AI for demand forecasting, inventory management, and dynamic pricing. For ESE workers, doing the hands-on work of food preparation and distribution, day-to-day tasks remain largely unchanged — but the operational environment around them is shifting considerably. In staffing, AI adoption among employer clients is already changing the shape of demand: fewer temp-to-perm arrangements, shorter contracts, more episodic placements. For staffing ESEs, that's a meaningful shift since temp-to-perm has historically been one of the cleaner pathways to stable employment for workers with barriers, and a shorter-contract model puts more stress on both the business and the workers it serves. More on this in Part 4.

- **Earlier in the curve** — Landscaping and construction are seeing early adoption mostly on the operational and design side: scheduling optimization, predictive maintenance, smart irrigation, AI-assisted project planning. Physical site work remains largely unchanged for now, and the complexity of these environments means it's likely to stay that way longer than other sectors. One counterpoint worth noting: the data center and infrastructure buildout driven by AI demand is generating substantial construction and trades work that ESEs can access, particularly through pre-apprenticeship pipelines.

PART 3: WHAT WE HEARD FROM ESE LEADERS

What the research describes, ESE leaders largely confirmed: AI's effects are being felt both gradually and unevenly. In the spring of 2026, we spoke with more than 20 leaders from different sectors including street maintenance, food service, landscaping, staffing, and tech services. We asked them what they were seeing in their industries, how they were using AI in their own organizations, and what they thought it meant for the workers they serve.

One candid note before getting into what we found: the leaders who agreed to talk with us about AI skew toward the more engaged end of the field when it comes to AI specifically. The picture we're about to describe probably *understates* how many organizations haven't yet engaged at all. With that caveat, what we heard fell into three fairly distinct groups.

A small group is already leaning in

A handful of organizations have moved beyond experimentation into something that looks more like transformation. They started with small, concrete tests, saw enough early payoff to invest further, and are now operating in ways that would have been hard to imagine two or three years ago. Two stood out enough to describe in detail.

Hopeworks is an ESE headquartered in Camden, New Jersey, serving young adults. While their model — providing technology services and training barriered young adults for careers in the tech sector — is relatively uncommon in the ESE landscape, they have demonstrated what AI transformation looks like in an ESE context, and how AI can level the playing field for workers whose barriers have been about access rather than capability. As Dan Rhoton, their executive director put it, *"AI is the best thing that's ever happened to Hopeworks and the young adults we serve."*

The impact runs through both sides of their model. On the business side, AI tools have expanded the ceiling on what their young adults can deliver, allowing Hopeworks to take on contracts that were previously out of reach. On the program side, they've shifted what they teach: less time on manual execution, more time on how to work effectively alongside AI tools, supervise outputs, catch errors, and bring judgment to bear on what the tools produce. The goal, as Hopeworks puts it, is turning young people into users of technology rather than consumers of it.

The results have been striking. Their graduates — young adults without traditional credentials, navigating barriers to employment — are going into interviews with AI fluency that more conventionally credentialed candidates often lack. And they are winning these jobs outright. *"Our young adults, equipped and trained on AI tools, are outcompeting people with four-year degrees,"* Rhoton said. *"And our employer partners are saying they want employees like our young adults going forward."*

Part of what's driving this is a change in preparation that AI interview tools make possible at scale: where traditional face-to-face coaching might get a worker a handful of mock interviews, AI tools let workers practice many more times, on their own schedule, without the challenge of

coordinating with a staff member. Preliminary Hopeworks data suggests that graduates trained on their AI interview tools are conducting 80% more mock interviews, advancing to second and third interviews at a higher rate, and are ultimately earning wages up to 30% higher than graduates that were not.

The underlying insight here is critical: **AI is a particularly powerful equalizer for people whose barriers have been about access and credential rather than capability**. What ESE workers have historically lacked is the polish and formal credentials that hiring processes use as proxies for ability. AI tools can narrow those gaps in ways that years of skills training alone couldn't.

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) is the largest reentry–focused ESE in the country, directly serving around 9,000 returning citizens out of the roughly 600,000 who return home each year. They've responded to that gap not just by growing their direct service footprint, but by building AI-powered tools designed to extend their reach — and eventually to travel to other organizations serving the same population.

The centerpiece is a voice coaching tool — accessible by phone, no app download required — that allows workers to practice job interviews and build skills in a judgment-free environment, any time of day or night. CEO deployed this to 500 workers and found that those who used it during their job search reached job placements faster, with roughly an hour of AI coaching producing measurable gains. They're now building the platform for deployment to incarcerated populations before release and making it available to other organizations.

Alongside that, CEO built AI-generated case notes within their Salesforce system — recording coaching sessions, auto-generating notes in a standardized format, and providing immediate feedback to coaches. Pilot results have shown a 15 to 20 percent reduction in administrative time for case managers, freeing them for more actual coaching and reducing burnout.

How CEO got here is as instructive as what they built. Dane Worthington, currently CEO's senior director of AI strategy and who led the development of these tools, started as a leader on the program side of the organization, not the tech side. He understood the participant worker journey deeply, started small — hiring a part-time automation specialist to prove out a concept — and built from there. *"We identified several aspects of our process that we thought would benefit from AI integration, used off-the-shelf tools where possible, and focused on proving value before scaling,"* Worthington said.

Unified Wood Economy, an ESE in Memphis working in reclaimed lumber and manufacturing, is worth a mention, too. Their executive director built custom AI agents for proposal writing and site selection largely through a student intern with specialized knowledge in AI. These tools are helping the organization to rapidly expand to 10 locations. His read on the stakes was unambiguous: organizations that figure out how to use these tools will capture more business. Those that don't will gradually lose ground to competitors that are operating more efficiently.

A larger group is primed and watching

The more common picture we encountered was organizations that are aware and genuinely interested — but not yet experimenting with enough intention to see the kind of results the first group is seeing. For many, this reflects a reasonable read of where they sit: their core business doesn't feel immediately threatened, their frontline work is hard to automate, and the case for urgency is real but not yet staring them in the face.

Amelia Nickerson, the CEO of **First Step Staffing**, captured this posture well: *"We want to do more with AI, but doing so feels like driving an 18-wheeler without a license…we need guidance and instruction before we're ready to put it into drive."* Her organization is thinking about AI, hearing about it constantly, and is genuinely interested in what it could do for their case management and participant navigation work. What they don't have yet is a clear enough sense of where to start.

Trevor Kale, COO at **Chrysalis**, described something similar. They have staff who are effective with AI tools on their own, they've started using it for note-taking and administrative support, and they've invested in new positions focused on digital process improvement. But they haven't yet developed a clear view of where AI fits into their program model or given explicit top-down encouragement for staff to experiment broadly. Trevor's read on their street maintenance business — that physical, place-bound work is more protected than most from near-term disruption — is probably right. What's less certain is whether that protection extends to the operational side: bidding, scheduling, cost efficiency. That's where the competitive pressure from AI-adopting firms is most likely to show up first.

SLA Inc., a landscaping ESE in Los Angeles, has made more deliberate progress — using ChatGPT for scheduling and training development, adopting Airtable with built-in AI features, and actively thinking about how to incorporate AI skills into their eight-week worker training. Adoption started organically, with staff using tools and finding them valuable, and leadership leaning in. Jessie Salazar, SLA Inc.'s executive director and founder, noted that the unions their graduates enter haven't yet discussed AI's implications for their trades — a gap worth paying attention to when that's where 80 percent of your graduates are headed.

Throughout our interviews, the leaders in this group surfaced a range of reasons for why they haven't yet fully leaned in, though it's worth noting that what we heard was anything but a monolith. Responses varied considerably across organizations, with some seeing a particular barrier as a major hurdle, while others saw few points of friction on the same dimension. But the reasons generally fell into one of two camps.

In the first camp, organizations pointed to structural factors like uncertainty about how to keep worker data safe and build responsible AI policies; questions about where to house AI leadership (e.g., under IT, under program, under the executive director?); uncertainty about where to sequence AI training within existing programming; and a pace of change that makes it difficult to know when the right moment to commit really is.

In the second camp, concerns centered on trust and culture: expected or observed resistance from staff or participant workers, negative stigma around what AI is and what it means, and

guilt. We heard from one organization that using LLMs "feels like cheating." These are real concerns, and for organizations whose staff often share the lived experiences of the people they serve, they deserve particular care and thought.

Notably, we didn't hear leaders describe financial constraints as a key impediment to action. Most expressed that if they had more confidence about where to start — and confidence that staff would actually adopt — they could find the resources necessary to invest, whether internally or through external funding.

And some organizations haven't yet engaged

Among the leaders we spoke with, there were some for whom AI genuinely hasn't risen to the level of active organizational consideration. Staff may be using tools individually and informally, but there's no active encouragement from leadership and no emerging sense of urgency. For some, AI simply hasn't registered as relevant to their sector or their workers. For others, the speed of change has produced skepticism rather than urgency, a sense that this is hype that will pass, or that the technology isn't mature enough to trust. And for some, it's more basic: the tools are unfamiliar, the use cases aren't obvious, and there hasn't been a compelling enough reason to prioritize figuring it out.

What the contrast tells us

What the early movers share is a set of practices more than a particular level of resourcing or sophistication. They started with a specific, concrete problem rather than trying to build a comprehensive AI strategy first. They gave someone — often a program person with deep participant worker knowledge, not a tech person — real latitude to try things. They were transparent with staff about what they were testing. And when something showed early promise, they invested to deepen it.

That last point runs against an instinct many leaders have: to develop a clear roadmap before taking action. With AI, the evidence from organizations that have made the most progress suggests the roadmap emerges from doing rather than planning. As Rhoton put it: *"Learning how to use AI effectively is a lot like learning to play basketball. You don't need to read a lot of books about it. Just get on the court and start playing."*

The gap between organizations (not just ESEs) that are figuring this out and those that aren't is going to keep widening. The businesses ESEs compete against for contracts, the employers whose expectations ESE workers need to meet, the other workforce organizations competing for the same participants and funding — none of them had a decade-long head start on AI. ESEs had the same starting line. The organizations that are already leaning in are building compounding advantages in operational efficiency, staff capacity, and worker outcomes that will be increasingly hard to close later. For ESEs specifically, the time to start is now, while the fellow ESEs that have gotten furthest are still reachable and willing to share what they've learned.

PART 4: THE OPPORTUNITY AND THE STAKES

ESEs that engage AI strategically stand to become stronger businesses, run better programs, and prepare workers more effectively for what the labor market looks like. Here's what that looks like in practice.

THE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

ESEs operate in competitive markets where margins are often thin and winning contracts depends on delivering quality work efficiently. That competitive environment is changing. Firms that adopt AI tools — for scheduling, bidding, cost estimation, route optimization, quality monitoring, preventive maintenance, fundraising — are becoming more efficient and innovative, and will be able to price more aggressively and take on more work with the same headcount. For ESEs competing in those same markets, that's a meaningful shift in the landscape regardless of what's happening on the frontlines.

Beyond keeping pace, AI opens the door to expanded capacity and more complex work. Hopeworks is the clearest example: AI tools expanded the ceiling on what their young adults could deliver, allowing them to pursue and win projects that previously exceeded their capacity. Unified Wood Economy's executive director made the same point from the manufacturing side — organizations that figure out how to use these tools will capture more business, and he's already seeing it.

A few operational areas stand out as consistent opportunities across most ESE types:

- **Grant writing, reporting, and communications** is probably the most accessible starting point. The tools are available, the learning curve is manageable, and the time savings are immediate. Most of the leaders we spoke with were already using AI here in some form.

- **Scheduling and workforce coordination** is where many ESEs spend significant manual effort. SLA moved from supervisors scheduling by intuition to using ChatGPT to optimize routes and role coordination. First Step Staffing sees it as one of the highest-value places AI could change their operations.

- **Case management and participant worker support** has significant potential. CEO's 15 to 20 percent reduction in administrative time for case managers is the clearest example — hours returned to the work that measurably moves the needle for participant workers. And in a world where case managers are often stretched thin, AI can also help triage where human attention is most needed: which worker are at critical inflection points, where lighter-touch support is sufficient for now, etc. Over time, that kind of analysis can surface insights about population patterns, common barriers, and the kinds of support that correlate with better outcomes. AI tools are also showing promise in benefits navigation, helping case managers more efficiently connect workers to the social services they're eligible for (examples: My Friend Ben; Amplifi)

The barrier to getting started is lower than most leaders assume. CEO's first tools were built by a program person with a part-time contractor. SLA Inc.'s adoption started with staff using ChatGPT on their phones. Early experiments tend to generate their own momentum.

ESEs also operate with something most competitors don't have — a deep, structured relationship with their workforce, built on genuine investment in workers' stability and growth. As AI tools make certain operational functions more efficient, the human capacity freed up can be redirected toward the things that differentiate ESEs: intentional job design, wraparound support, trusted employer relationships. AI, used well, can create more room for what makes ESEs distinctive. And the businesses ESEs compete against for contracts are mostly at the same early stage of AI adoption that ESEs are. That won't last. Efficiency gains compound, and the organizations that figure this out first will be harder to catch later. ESEs that move now can get ahead of competitors in a way the field has rarely had the opportunity to do.

THE WORKFORCE OPPORTUNITY

AI tools are turning out to be a meaningful equalizer. The workers who stand to benefit most from that equalizing effect are often exactly the workers ESEs serve. And that's a story the field hasn't told loudly enough.

The labor market has long used credentials, polish, and professional networks as signals of capability, and for many roles, those signals are useful. The problem is that they also screen out workers who can do the job but lack the specific markers hiring processes look for: a continuous employment history, fluency with professional communication conventions, access to the networks that generate referrals. Workers navigating reentry, extended periods outside the formal economy, or systems that simply never gave them the right onramp have had to clear that filtering before they could demonstrate their ability at all.

AI chips away at that filtering in important ways. Workers who struggled to write professional emails can now do so fluently. Workers unfamiliar with resume formatting conventions can now produce polished documents. Workers who never had access to interview coaching can now practice with an AI coach available at any hour. Each of these was previously a point of exclusion. Removing them changes who gets in the door.

Research from Opportunity@Work and Brookings, published in April 2026, puts analytical weight behind this. Their work on STARs — workers skilled through alternative routes, without four-year degrees — finds that AI could meaningfully increase access to higher-wage roles by closing knowledge gaps and reducing the friction that has made upward mobility so difficult. Critically, they also find that domain expertise remains essential: the ability to direct AI toward the right problem and evaluate whether its output is correct requires human knowledge the tool itself can't replace. For workers who have built genuine domain expertise through experience rather than credentials, that's a meaningful shift in leveraging that expertise.

ESEs have always known something the broader workforce field has been slow to say out loud: the skills that matter most for long-term employment success are not primarily technical ones. Problem-solving under pressure, adaptability, receiving and acting on feedback, judgment in

ambiguous situations, communication across difference — these have been called "soft skills" in ways that undersell both their difficulty and their value (though we fully support active efforts to reframe these as *durable skills*). In an AI-augmented labor market, they're becoming more important because they're what AI is worst at replicating. ESE workers often arrive with real raw material here. The creativity, adaptability, and problem-solving that comes from navigating genuinely difficult circumstances is a form of expertise, even when it hasn't been named or credentialed as such. And ESEs are particularly good at helping workers build, surface, articulate, and apply those capacities along a continuum — meeting workers where they are and developing these skills over time. In an AI-augmented environment, that combination — lived expertise plus the ability to deploy it alongside AI tools — is what employers are going to need.

AI training and durable skills development reinforce each other, and ESEs should invest in both explicitly. A worker learning to use AI tools effectively is also learning to evaluate outputs critically, identify when something is wrong, and bring their own judgment to bear on what a machine produces. Teaching workers to work alongside AI is, in part, another way of teaching them to think. ESEs should say so — to workers, to employer partners, and to funders.

TWO THINGS WORTH WATCHING

- **First, the opportunity that AI represents lands differently across populations, and it's worth being honest about the variation.** The workers most immediately primed to benefit are those whose primary barriers have been about credential and access rather than foundational digital literacy. For example, opportunity youth seem well positioned to capitalize quickly. For workers with deeper digital literacy gaps — people coming out of long-term incarceration, chronic homelessness, or extended disconnection from technology — the path to benefit is longer, and requires more intentional scaffolding.

  Some ESE leaders approach this as a reason to lean in: AI can be a way to accelerate workers' access to digital tools more broadly. Others see it as a barrier: AI requires more from users than a standard smartphone, and rolling it out without the right foundation can undermine trust. Both instincts are reasonable. What CEO's work suggests, though, is that population characteristics are not destiny. Their workers — predominantly coming directly out of incarceration — are benefiting meaningfully from AI coaching tools. The difference tends to come down to ESE strategy: how intentionally the organization builds digital literacy as a foundation, and how thoughtfully it sequences workers' introduction to these tools in relation to their starting point.

- **Second, AI screening tools in hiring operate as a countervailing force.** As employers embed AI into hiring processes — scanning resumes, scoring applications before a human recruiter looks at them — they can create new barriers for workers with records, employment gaps, or nonlinear histories. As trusted employer partners, ESEs are positioned to push back: to ask what these tools measure, advocate for human review, and help employers see when screening systems are costing them good workers. ESEs that engage AI strategically will be stronger businesses, better workforce developers, and ultimately more effective advocates for the workers they serve. The organizations leaning into AI right now are showing what's possible.

PART 5: WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

The question we hear most consistently from ESE leaders is *how should I get started?* This section tries to answer that question concretely, for ESEs themselves, for the funders who support them, and for the policymakers who shape the environment in which they operate.

FOR ESES: START BEFORE YOU'RE READY

The most important thing we can say about getting started with AI is also the thing that runs most against the grain for organizations accustomed to careful planning: don't wait for a complete picture before you begin. The organizations that have made the most progress — Hopeworks, CEO, Unified Wood Economy, SLA Inc. — didn't start with a comprehensive AI strategy. They started with a specific problem, tried something, and learned from what happened. The roadmap came from doing, not from planning to do.

That means the first move for most ESEs is less about strategy and more about permission — giving staff explicit encouragement to experiment with AI tools in their daily work, sharing what they find, and treating early failures as information rather than reasons to stop. In most organizations, there are already staff members using AI tools on their own. Making that visible and intentional is often the highest-leverage first step.

From there, a few areas of focus are worth prioritizing:

- **Start at the task level —** Map specific workflows — in business operations and in programming — and ask where manual, time-consuming steps might be candidates for automation or augmentation. The goal is finding one or two places where the potential payoff is clear enough to justify giving it a try.

- **Start with what's most accessible —** Grant writing and reporting, case note generation, scheduling, data analysis, communications — these come up consistently as the places where AI can produce immediate, tangible results without requiring custom tools or technical expertise. Start there, build confidence, and expand from what works. And don't overlook the potential for these tools to make your own content more accessible to workers. For example, consider using a tool like NotebookLM to generate conversational, plain-language explanations of dense, jargon-rich documents (program manuals, policy documents, benefit eligibility, etc.).

- **Build a culture that makes experimentation safe** — Create explicit space for staff to share how they are using AI, encourage staff with more tool fluency to coach those with less, lift up and celebrate cool or innovative ideas at all-staffs, etc. Consider similar elements with workers: sit alongside them as they use these tools, talk through how to evaluate outputs critically, and encourage the act of re-prompting.

- **Use AI to support continuous organizational learning** — AI can help organizations get smarter over time. Consider feeding program or business data into an AI tool and asking

it to surface patterns, flag anomalies, or generate discussion questions for staff reflection. Done in a regular cadence (e.g., every 6-8 weeks), this kind of structured inquiry can make data review less burdensome and more generative, and help teams build the habit of learning from what data they're taking in.

- **Introduce AI tools as part of how workers train, not as a special add-on** — This applies on two fronts. On the program side, embed AI into digital literacy training — and for ESEs not already investing systematically in digital literacy, now is the moment. AI tools are more interactive and immediately rewarding than traditional approaches: workers can use them to draft a message, prep for an interview, or navigate a benefits system in real time, and that tangible return tends to generate its own motivation. And pair tool fluency with the cultivation of judgment: help workers understand what's appropriate to share, how to protect their privacy, and how to evaluate output critically. On the operations side, give workers hands-on experience with the tools shaping their work environment — scheduling platforms, quality dashboards, automated systems — so that comfort with technology is built through doing vs. being taught in the abstract.

- **Invest in and name the durable skills that AI can't replace** — Problem-solving under pressure, adaptability, giving and receiving feedback, judgment in ambiguous situations — these are what ESE training has always emphasized, and they're becoming more valuable as AI handles more routine work. Keep investing in building these capacities deliberately. And say so explicitly to workers, employer partners, and funders: these aren't "soft" skills. They're the core of what workers bring that technology cannot replicate.

- **Push employer partners to be intentional about job redesign** — As AI tools reshape the task composition of frontline roles, employers will face choices (often implicit ones) about what human workers are asked to do and what gets handed off to a system. ESEs, as trusted employer partners, are positioned to ask those questions out loud: when you adopt this tool, what happens to the work that people are doing today? What do you want these roles to develop into? How are you investing in the workers who remain? This is an advocacy role that most ESEs are well positioned to play and that most are not yet playing.

- **Push back on AI screening tools that create new barriers** — ESEs should be asking employer partners directly what their automated screening tools are truly measuring, whether those signals predict job performance or reproduce past patterns of exclusion, and whether there are human review processes in place for candidates whose profiles don't conform to what the algorithm expects. The employer relationships ESEs have built — grounded in personal trust and track records — are a meaningful hedge against algorithmic exclusion, and ESEs should use them.

- **For ESEs running pre-apprenticeship or registered apprenticeship programs** — Start thinking now about curriculum, considering how AI is reshaping task composition. The research from the Burning Glass Institute is instructive here: most roles experience both automation and augmentation simultaneously. Spend less time on tasks AI is

increasingly handling outright, and more on helping workers use AI as a tool, supervise its outputs, and bring their domain expertise to bear in evaluating what it produces.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR REDEFINE ALLIANCE

While the creation of this white paper required a modest academic stance, our commitment going forward is to do whatever we can to help ESEs find and apply *practical applications* of these tools to strengthen their businesses and improve outcomes for the workers they serve. And in our work with other stakeholders — specifically policymakers and colleagues in philanthropy — we commit to highlighting and advocating ways for this transition to happen that continue to center what is best for the worker.

With that in mind, Redefine Alliance intends to:

- **Serve as a learning hub for the network** — The organizations that have made the most progress on AI are generating real knowledge about what works — and that knowledge is not yet traveling across the field in any systematic way. Redefine Alliance is positioned to change that, by launching a community of practice that brings ESE leaders together for peer exchange, shared testing of tools and approaches, and mutual support as they experiment. The goal is that no ESE must figure this out alone.

- **Shift our own programming and capacity building to reflect the moment** — That means incorporating AI literacy — both for business operations and for workforce programming — into the support we provide to ESE leaders and their teams. It means asking different questions in our due diligence and portfolio conversations. And it means being honest with the organizations we support about what we think the competitive and workforce development landscape is going to look like in three to five years.

- **Develop and share a policy agenda in partnership with the field** — The policy considerations outlined in the next section reflect our current thinking. We intend to develop those positions further in conversation with ESE leaders and to advocate for them actively with the policymakers and funders who shape the conditions in which the field operates.

- **Update how we think about funding and investment** — The recommendations we make to funders in the next section apply to us too. We intend to fund experimentation, invest in infrastructure that helps share important insights across the field, and we'll prioritize investments in programs that are actively helping to prepare workers for a labor market being reshaped by AI.

FOR FUNDERS: FUND THE TRANSITION

Many of the recommendations we make for ESEs require resources that don't fit neatly into how most philanthropic funding is structured. We believe funders can accelerate the field's ability to navigate this transition by investing differently:

- **Fund experimentation explicitly** — Most ESE funding is tied to proven models and defined outcomes. That's reasonable for programs with established track records, but it creates a structural disincentive for the kind of early-stage, uncertain experimentation that AI adoption requires. Funders who want the field to move should create explicit room for it: grants that support trying things, documenting what happens, and sharing the learning — without requiring proof of impact before the experiment has had time to run.

- **Fund knowledge sharing across the field** — The organizations that are furthest along on AI are generating knowledge that would be enormously valuable to the rest of the field. Funding the infrastructure to ensure that knowledge travels — via convenings, documentation, peer learning networks, technical assistance — is one of the highest-leverage investments funders can make in this moment.

- **Support the people inside the ESEs that are doing the adapting** — AI adoption requires case managers, employment specialists, program directors, etc. to develop new skills and new ways of working. That's a real investment of time and attention, and it often falls outside the scope of what program funding covers.

FOR POLICYMAKERS: BUILD THE CONDITIONS FOR AN EQUITABLE TRANSITION

Redefine Alliance's broader policy priorities, developed in partnership with ESE leaders, can be found here. The recommendations below reflect our specific thinking on what the transition to AI requires.

The AI moment is an opportunity to do more than make targeted fixes to existing programs. The publicly-funded workforce system — including programs funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) — is underfunded relative to the scale of need, structured around performance metrics that create perverse incentives to serve those easiest to place rather than those who need help most, and built for a labor market that is changing faster than its rules and curriculum can keep up with. The specific recommendations below reflect our current thinking on what needs to change — and we intend to develop these positions further in partnership with ESE leaders and policy allies.

- **Reinvest in the workforce system at a scale commensurate with the challenge** — The publicly-funded workforce system has been chronically underfunded for decades. Federal expenditures on workforce programs peaked at roughly $60 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars in 1979 under CETA — compared to approximately $20 billion today across all federal workforce programs. Organizations that want to do more are constrained by what the system can support. Meaningful investment in helping frontline workers navigate the AI transition will require a serious recommitment to workforce funding, not incremental adjustments at the margins.

- **Rethink the performance metrics that shape what the system does** — The metrics currently used to evaluate publicly-funded workforce programs create structural incentives to serve workers who are easiest to place quickly instead of the workers

facing the greatest barriers. Organizations that prioritize people navigating reentry, homelessness, or long-term disconnection from the labor market are often penalized by systems designed to reward speed to employment above all else. Realigning performance measures to reward depth of service, longer-term employment outcomes, and demonstrated success with high-barrier populations would fundamentally change what the system prioritizes and serves.

- **Invest in workforce innovation and experimentation** — The workforce field needs dedicated funding for testing new models, documenting what works, and scaling what proves effective. This includes making better use of existing mechanisms — like WIOA Governor's Reserve funds, which states like California have used to support innovative approaches — and the creation of new ones. America Forward, Redefine Alliance, and other members of the America Forward Coalition have advocated for the creation of a Workforce Development Innovation Fund to support the development, testing, and expansion of evidence-based workforce programs, including ESEs. Past federal innovation funds have already demonstrated what this can unlock: the Workforce Innovation Fund provided seed funding for LA:RISE, which has now served nearly 10,000 people through ESEs.

- **Build a more agile, aligned system** — Achieving the goals above will require a workforce system that is more responsive and less burdened by administrative friction. ESEs and other providers cannot spend the majority of their time on compliance paperwork rather than intentional service delivery and innovation. Research consistently shows that supportive services — covering urgent needs like childcare or transportation that can derail program completion — are critical for high-barrier populations, yet local workforce agencies spend only about 3 percent of WIOA dollars on them. Current WIOA rules requiring providers to demonstrate that participants cannot obtain such services elsewhere create unnecessary friction that a more agile system would eliminate. Expanding participation in programs like SNAP E&T — which can be a meaningful funding stream for ESEs serving people facing food insecurity alongside employment barriers — similarly requires reducing the bureaucratic load that makes participation impractical for many providers. And the current cap on transitional jobs in WIOA is a counterproductive constraint given the evidence for transitional employment as a pathway for high-barrier populations. A more agile system would remove these structural friction points rather than accumulating them.

- **Establish digital and AI literacy as a baseline in publicly-funded workforce programs** — Digital fluency is increasingly a prerequisite for stable employment across frontline sectors. Rather than adding a new layer of compliance requirements, we'd encourage policymakers to establish digital and AI literacy as an explicit priority. In practice, this will look different by sector: a landscaper learning to read a route optimization dashboard; a food service worker navigating a digital inventory platform. To do this effectively, workforce programs need the resources and policy backing to address it systematically, not just when funding allows.

- **Invest in updating workforce development curriculum for the AI moment** — Any publicly-funded workforce development program should be actively asking whether it is preparing workers for the jobs that existed when the curriculum was written instead of the jobs workers are likely to encounter. DOL and state agencies should prioritize funding for curriculum updates that reflect how AI is reshaping task composition in frontline occupations, and should create streamlined processes for programs to update their standards more frequently. Attention should go to pre-apprenticeship pathways, where ESEs are especially well-positioned. For workers overcoming significant barriers, the first job has an outsized impact on long-term trajectory — and the earn-and-learn model that defines pre-apprenticeship is often the only viable on-ramp. ESEs are natural pre-apprenticeship sponsors: they combine real work experience, intentional skill-building, and the wraparound support that connects participants to Registered Apprenticeship Programs and the stable employment that follows. Federal workforce strategy should recognize and invest in this pathway explicitly.

- **Scrutinize AI screening tools in hiring** — Automated hiring tools that screen, score, or rank candidates before human review are already widespread, and their effects on workers with records, employment gaps, or nonlinear histories are not well understood. Policymakers should require transparency from employers using these tools — including evidence that they predict job performance rather than simply reproducing past hiring patterns — and should create mechanisms for workers and advocates to challenge screening decisions that appear to function as proxies for protected characteristics.

- **Ensure that the benefits of AI-driven efficiency reach workers** — As AI tools increase productivity in frontline sectors, the distribution of those gains is not predetermined. Policy has a role in shaping that distribution: through wage standards, investment in worker training, and procurement requirements that favor employers who demonstrate genuine investment in their frontline workforce.

- **Attend to the regional dimension** — The research already referenced from Opportunity@Work and Brookings underscores that AI's effects on career pathways for workers without four-year degrees will play out unevenly across regions. State and regional workforce systems should invest in understanding which pathways in their local markets are most at risk and which are being strengthened and form a coordinated response.

CLOSING

THE VERSION OF THE NEXT FIVE YEARS WE'RE CHOOSING

There are two plausible versions of the next five years for ESEs and the workers they serve.

In the first, the field waits. Organizations hold off on experimenting with AI until the picture gets clearer, the right tool becomes obvious, or a funder shows up with a specific grant to support it. Meanwhile, the businesses they compete against get more efficient. The workers they place arrive at employers whose expectations have quietly shifted, underprepared for what they find. The entry-level roles that have always been the foundation of ESE work become slightly harder to access, then a little harder still — because the informal prerequisites keep rising. And by the time the urgency feels undeniable, the gap has become significantly harder to close.

In the second version, the field moves. Not all at once, and not perfectly — but with enough intention that organizations are learning, sharing what they find, and building the muscle for ongoing adaptation. Workers leave ESE programs more fluent with the tools that are reshaping every industry they're entering. ESE businesses bid more competitively, take on more complex work, and make the case to employer partners that an intentional approach to job design is both the right thing and the smart thing. The field shapes how these transitions unfold rather than accepting whatever employers and competitors decide. And as ESEs figure out what works — for their businesses, for their workers, for their communities — those insights spread: to inclusive employers across these industries, to workforce systems that are watching for models that actually work, and to policymakers looking for evidence that a more equitable transition is possible.

What distinguishes those two versions is whether the people and organizations with the power to shape this transition — ESE leaders, funders, policymakers, inclusive employers — decide now, with imperfect information, before the perfect playbook exists, that this is worth their attention.

The organizations already leaning in are showing what's possible. The question now is how many others — in the ESE field and beyond it — will join them, and how soon.

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