

Why apply emotions?



Brain Fry: The Darkside of AI High Performance.

Applied Emotions: Humanising AI.

Executive Briefing Paper #3. April 2026.

Applied Emotions

Where Human Values Meet the Age of Intelligent Machines

MENTAL HEALTH

AI ADOPTION

PERFORMANCE

WORKSLOP

CRITICAL DRIFT

Brain Fry: The Darkside of AI High Performance

How Human Values and Emotions research exposes the roots of debilitating Brain Fry and how organisations can develop new ways of creating and supporting high performing individuals and teams.

Meet Mike Evans, a high performer's story.

Mike Evans is 32. He is a senior marketer at a white goods manufacturer employing around 2,000 people - the kind of company that makes washing machines, refrigerators and dishwashers that households buy once every five to seven years and research obsessively before committing. The product cycle in his industry is punishing. New product generations arrive every three to five years, bringing technologies that most consumers have never encountered. For Mike's role (bridging the R&D team and the market) the perennial challenge has always been the same: how do you communicate products that exceed the current knowledge of the people who need to buy them?



"AI Brain Fry is mental fatigue from excessive use or oversight of AI tools beyond a person's cognitive capacity".

Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study published in Harvard Business Review in March 2026

For most of his career, that challenge required a team. Deep consumer insight, competitive intelligence, product positioning, each discipline demanded its own specialist. Then AI arrived, and suddenly Mike found he could compress what previously took weeks of multi-team work into hours of focused prompting. He could map consumer decision journeys, model competitive responses, draft product narratives and test positioning hypotheses before lunch. For someone wired the way Mike is (achievement oriented, results oriented, action oriented & decisive), this felt like a superpower being handed directly to his ambitions. It was, for a while, the most satisfying period of his career.

What Mike did not anticipate was where the velocity would lead him.

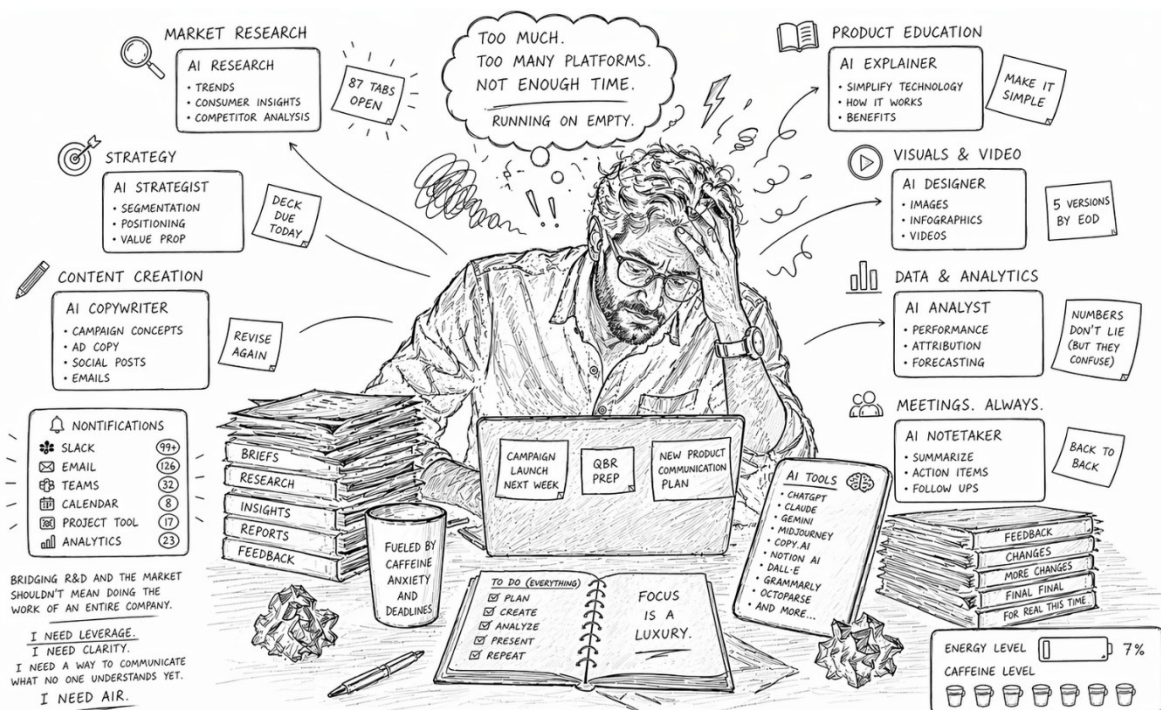
Because the same qualities that made AI feel so powerful - the sense that one more prompt could unlock one more insight, that one more iteration could sharpen the positioning just a little further - are the same qualities that make it almost impossible for someone like Mike to stop. His psychology does not experience "good enough" as a natural resting place. It experiences stopping as leaving performance on the table.

So the working day expanded. Then the evenings. Then the weekends.

Projects multiplied because the barrier to starting them had collapsed. He had more ideas than ever and increasingly less capacity to execute them cleanly.

The errors started small. A briefing document sent to the R&D team that contained a confident consumer insight Mike had not properly verified - AI-generated, plausible-sounding, but wrong.

A product positioning deck that arrived in his director's inbox with a competitor price benchmark eighteen months out of date. A campaign brief where two different AI-generated versions of the same consumer segment had been unknowingly merged, the internal contradictions invisible until the agency flagged them.



Each incident was recoverable, but the pattern was not.

What confused Mike - and what makes this story important - is the disconnect between how much he knows and how he feels.

He has access to more consumer intelligence, competitive data and market insight than at any point in his career. He should feel confident. Instead he feels perpetually behind. He is irritable in meetings in ways that are new and uncomfortable. He catches himself being short with colleagues he likes. At home, he is distracted in ways his partner has started to name. He falls asleep quickly but wakes at 3am with fragments of unfinished work cycling through his mind.

Mike begun to wonder, quietly and without telling anyone whether he had fried his brain. He has, and he is not alone.

This report explains why and what organisations must do before more of their best people reach the same point.

The profile of a high performer.

High performers are strongly aligned to externally facing, status-conscious motivational values, specifically:

Achievement Oriented | Results Oriented | Action Oriented | Decisive

With that definition in mind, let's define AI Brain Fry:

AI Brain Fry refers to a long-term exhaustion with a decrease in general interest, specifically in the context of AI being introduced into the workplace. It is more than conventional burnout - it encompasses a qualitative shift in how workers experience and relate to their roles.

Key symptoms include:

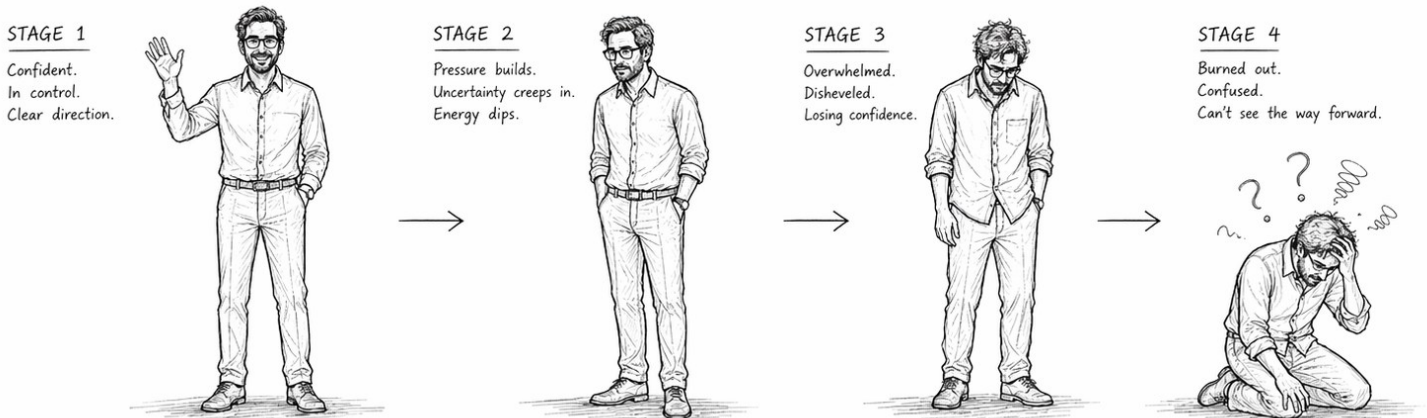
- State of physical exhaustion at the end of the working day.
- Cynicism, irritability and detachment towards colleagues and clients.
- Feeling of emotional exhaustion.
- Difficulty concentrating at work.
- Extreme dissatisfaction with work.
- Uncertainty about how to improve and progress.
- Changed sleeping patterns.

The Research Evidence

AI Brain Fry is a concept that has moved rapidly from speculation to documented phenomenon. The evidence base is now substantial, drawing on multiple peer-reviewed and professional studies conducted between 2023 and early 2026. UC Berkeley Study (Ranganathan & Ye) was an 8-month longitudinal study by UC Berkeley Professor Aruna Ranganathan and Xingqi Maggie Ye, published in Harvard Business Review, tracked 200 employees and reached a stark conclusion: "AI makes it easier to do more but harder to stop."

The study identified three primary mechanisms through which AI intensifies work rather than reducing it:

- **Task expansion** - tasks that previously required specialist teams now feel achievable solo, leading professionals to take on far more than is sustainable.
- **Boundary dissolution** - the ease and portability of AI tools erodes the separation between work and personal time, with prompting sessions regularly extending into evenings and commutes.
- **Multitasking escalation** - the speed of AI-assisted output creates pressure to run multiple workstreams simultaneously.



BCG/HBR Study (January 2026)

A major study of 1,488 workers published in January 2026 provided the first quantified picture of AI Brain Fry's prevalence and organisational impact:

- 14% of all workers surveyed showed symptoms of AI Brain Fry.
- 26% of workers in marketing roles were affected - the highest of any sector.
- 19% of HR professionals reported symptoms.
- AI Brain Fry is associated with a 39% increase in major errors.
- Affected workers are 39% more likely to be actively seeking new employment.

These are not marginal effects.

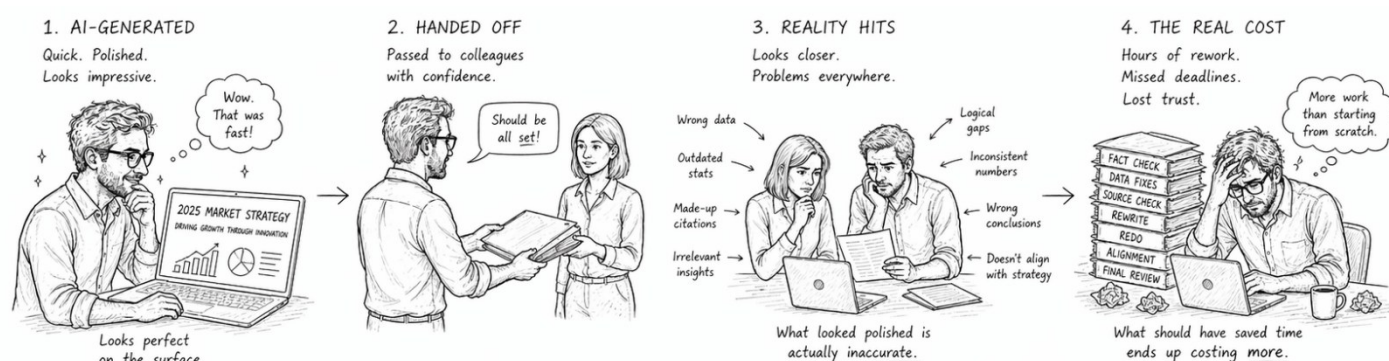
A near-doubling of serious error rates and a substantial increase in attrition risk represent a direct threat to organisational performance precisely in the functions, marketing and HR, that are most central to people-intensive organisations.

The Workstop Problem.

Workstop, a term coined by Stanford researcher Jeff Hancock and colleagues at BetterUp describes AI-generated work that appears polished on the surface but is so flawed or inaccurate that it requires heavy correction, rework, or complete redo once passed to colleagues.

A survey of 1,150 US desk workers (part of a wider study of 5,000 white-collar workers) found that 40% had encountered workstop within the preceding month. The study was published in **Harvard Business Review**, not just coined as a general term. They projected that up to **\$9 million** per year for a 10,000-person organisation was being lost on reworking AI-originated content based on nearly 2 hours per incident.

The workstop phenomenon is not primarily a story of lazy workers cutting corners. As Hancock notes, workers are often being told to use AI without adequate direction, support, or training. The resulting errors compound when AI-generated outputs from multiple team members conflict, correction effort multiplies beyond what would have been needed without AI at all.



Critically, the study found a stark divide between management perception and worker reality: **40% of non-managers' report that AI saves them no time at all, while 92% of high-level executives say it makes them more productive.**

This disconnect is itself a risk factor. Executives who believe AI is working are unlikely to put in place the support structures workers need. This is challenge of the AI era: creating new forms of working structures to provide greater ROI in the human corporate assets who provide the source of profitability. **The basic orientation must be putting the emphasis on human intelligence and creativity driving the ROI in AI development; not the current corporate dynamic of AI driving ROI.**

The Ironies of Automation: the future foretold.

The theoretical underpinning for much of this analysis comes from Lisanne Bainbridge's 1983 paper "Ironies of Automation." Bainbridge identified that the more sophisticated an automated system becomes, the more demanding and skill-intensive the human monitoring role becomes - a pattern that maps directly onto the AI workplace experience.

The worker who uses AI to scale up their output does not escape cognitive load - they transform it. Rather than doing the work, they must now judge, verify, correct and integrate AI outputs, often across multiple simultaneous workstreams. For high performers already operating at the edge of their capacity, this transformation of load type - not reduction of load - is the trigger for Brain Fry.

Cultural and Structural Amplifiers.

Two broader trends are amplifying the clinical risk of AI Brain Fry.

First, widespread layoffs in AI-adopting organisations have increased both the volume of work remaining staff must absorb and the anxiety associated with job security. A 30%+ reduction in entry-level tech roles, combined with pressure to use AI as a productivity substitute for headcount, creates a context of anxiety and vigilance (identified as the source of many forms of PTSD) which is neurologically costly to people who welcome and embrace challenge to satisfy their needs for success.

Second, there is evidence of a deliberate cultural shift away from the wellness-oriented workplace norms that emerged post-pandemic. Some sectors (particularly technology) are reasserting harder-edged competitive cultures, with founders and senior employees regularly working 12 to 16-hour days.

For workers already managing an AI-intensified workload, the removal of protective cultural norms increases vulnerability significantly. The initiative for change for a new and more financially secure future must begin with human values driven policies that recognize humans need breaks when working with AI; just as AI needs human creativity to produce sustainable profitability.

Organisational Implications.

The mere existence of Brain Fry research creates an uncomfortable organisational reality: the people most likely to push the hardest with AI are the same people most likely to fry their brains doing so. **High performers are self-selecting into the highest-risk positions.**

This has several practical implications:

- Standard burnout monitoring and intervention frameworks are unlikely to catch AI Brain Fry early both because it presents differently from conventional burnout and because the workers most affected are high performers who are likely to mask or minimise symptoms.
- Organisational AI adoption strategies that rely primarily on 'champions' to model and drive usage are amplifying rather than managing the risk.
- The 39% increase in major errors associated with Brain Fry is most likely to occur in high-stakes, complex work, exactly the work that high performers carry.

- The 39% increase in job-seeking among Brain Fry-affected workers creates an attrition risk concentrated at the top of the performance distribution.

What Organisations Must Do.

The evidence assembled in this report points to a single uncomfortable conclusion: organisations are currently using their best people to absorb the full cost of AI adoption, without providing any of the structural or cultural support needed to make that sustainable. The result is a self-defeating dynamic in which the individuals most likely to drive AI-enabled performance gains are the same individuals most likely to be destroyed by them.

This is not an argument against AI adoption. It is an argument for AI adoption designed around the human values of those deploying it. The path forward requires interventions at three levels:

1. Individual awareness.
2. Enhanced management practices.
3. Redesigned organisational architecture.

None of these is sufficient alone.

Individual Awareness: Naming the Pattern.

High performers are unlikely to self-identify as at risk. Their values orientate them toward progress, not protection. The first organisational task is therefore education: helping high performers understand why their specific motivational architecture - the same architecture that makes them outstanding contributors - creates disproportionate vulnerability to AI Brain Fry.

Sharing an individual's values profile in the context of AI Brain Fry risk is not a welfare conversation, it is a performance conversation. For high performers especially, framing protection as a performance strategy ("you can't sprint indefinitely") lands far more effectively than framing it as wellbeing support. **Mike Evans is not going to respond to a wellness email however he will respond to a compelling argument that sustainable high performance requires intentional recovery.**

Management Practice: The Duty of Care Imperative.

The BCG/HBR data reveals a dangerous management blind spot: 92% of senior executives believe AI is making their teams more productive, while 40% of non-managers report it saves them no time at all. This perception gap is not merely a communication problem - it is an organisational liability. Leaders who believe AI is working have no incentive to install the protective structures that workers need.

Closing this gap requires that managers actively seek signal rather than waiting for symptom. The 39% increase in major errors and 39% increase in job-seeking associated with Brain Fry are lagging indicators - they appear after the damage is already done. Managers need leading indicators: workload volume, project-initiation frequency, out-of-hours tool usage, and

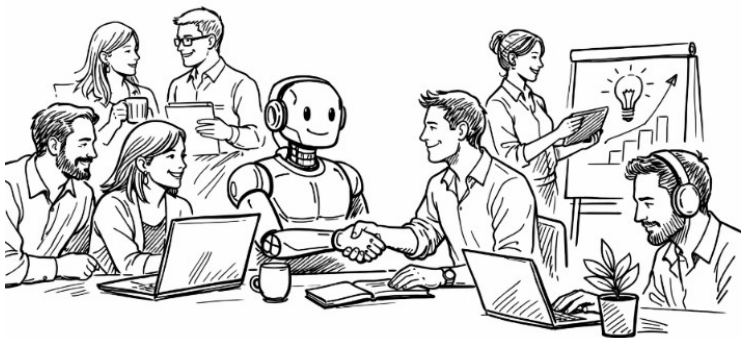
behavioural change at the margin (irritability, reduced engagement in team discussion, declining output quality on complex tasks).

Critically, management conversations about AI use should be normalised as part of regular performance dialogue and not reserved for crisis moments. *“How is your AI workload structured?”* should be as routine a question in a one-to-one as *“What’s your capacity like this month?”*

The AI Brain Fry Risk and Response Matrix.

The matrix below maps the principal risk factors and recommended organisational responses across three levels of intervention: individual, management, and structural. It is designed as a practical starting point for organisations assessing their current exposure.

Level	Primary Risk Factor	Warning Signs	Recommended Response
Individual	Prospector values drive task expansion and boundary dissolution; “one more prompt” compulsion aligned with core motivators.	Multiplying project count; evening and weekend AI use; irritability; feeling perpetually behind despite high output.	Personal risk profiling; frame AI limits as performance strategy, not wellness support; establish personal “off” protocols.
Management	Perception gap between executive confidence in AI productivity and worker reality; absence of early-warning monitoring.	Rising error rates in complex work; increased attrition signals; disengagement in high performers who were previously enthusiastic adopters.	Integrate AI workload into standard 1:1 conversations; use leading indicators (project volume, out-of-hours use); act on early signals, not lagging outcomes.
Structural	Absence of AI governance; headcount reduction increasing per-person workload; cultural normalisation of always-on working.	Workslop circulating in workflows; top-performer attrition; sector-wide quality decline in high-complexity deliverables.	Establish AI output governance before circulation); implement explicit project load monitoring; protect recovery time as policy, not aspiration.

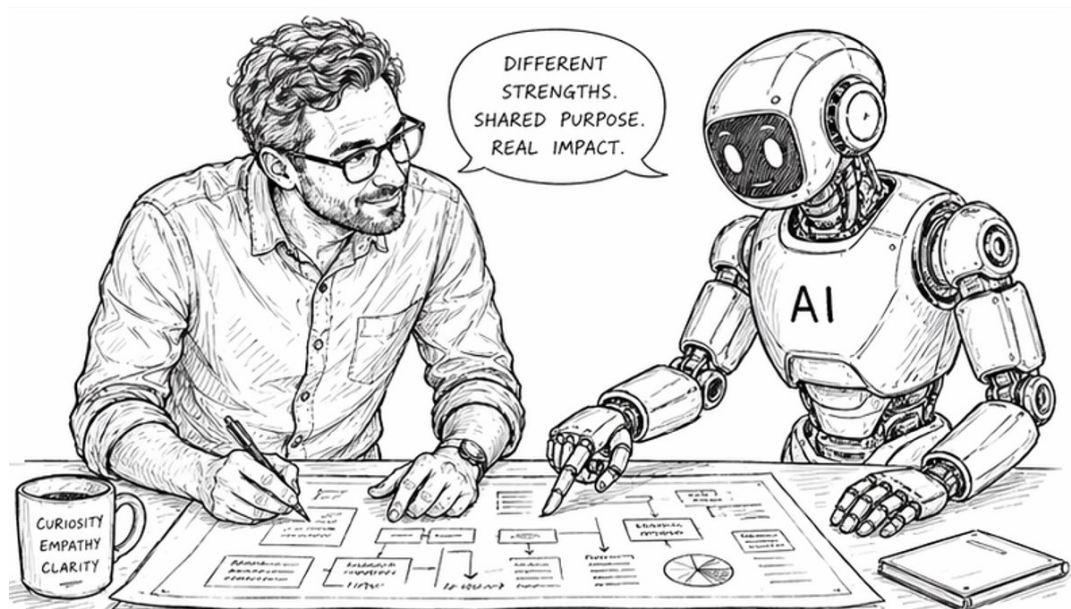


The Central Principle: Human Intelligence Driving AI ROI.

The framing that runs through this report is deliberate. The question is not how organisations can use AI to drive more from their people. It is how organisations can ensure their people remain capable of driving the most from AI. That inversion - human intelligence directing AI, rather than AI directing human effort - is not semantic. It is the difference between an organisation that extracts short-term productivity gains and then loses its best performers, and one that builds a genuinely sustainable competitive advantage.

Mike Evans, in this report's opening story, is a solvable problem. His organisation has not lost him yet. But the window for intervention is not indefinite. High performers who have fried their brains do not stay to recover - they leave, taking with them the accumulated institutional knowledge, customer relationships, and creative capability that no AI system can replicate.

Protecting them is not a cost. It is the highest-return investment an organisation can make in the AI era.



MIKE + AI

BETTER TOGETHER.

-  **BIG IDEAS. CLEARER.**
AI helps explore more possibilities, faster.
-  **SMARTER INSIGHTS.**
AI turns complexity into clarity with data and depth.
-  **BETTER DECISIONS.**
Together, we challenge assumptions and choose what matters.
-  **HUMAN AT THE CENTER.**
AI handles the heavy lifting. Mike brings the judgment, empathy and experience. That's where impact happens.

HOW AI HELPS US WIN

-  **RESEARCH & ANALYSIS**
AI scans massive amounts of data to surface what's relevant.
-  **IDEATION & EXPLORATION**
AI generates options and perspectives to spark better ideas.
-  **PLANNING & TESTING**
AI simulates, tests and predicts so we plan with confidence.
-  **COMMUNICATION & STORYTELLING**
AI helps craft clear, compelling stories that connect.

AI AMPLIFIES WHAT WE CAN DO.
TOGETHER, WE DO WHAT MATTERS.

Here's How We Can Help

Applied Emotions has mapped Human Values. We know how to apply these values to humanise AI, to better align people, technology and organisations to create enhanced cultural, societal, operational & organisational harmony.

We bring to bear over 40 years of Human Values data, sourced from over 1 million people across 26 countries that can be used to better align organisations to their people, 'non-human team members' and their customers or train and re-train artificial technologies to better reflect who we are.

Applied Emotions practice areas draw directly on validated psychographic instruments and extends them through a proprietary AI values auditing methodology. These practices deliver three core service streams, each designed to operate independently or as an integrated programme.

- 1. Values Mapping and Team Diagnostics.** Using validated and tested segmentation tools, we map the values profiles of your human team members at individual and collective level. This baseline identifies where emotional responses to AI collaboration are likely to emerge, why, and how to address them before they calcify into dysfunctional resistance or uncritical compliance.
- 2. AI Values Auditing.** This examines the AI systems your organisation uses e.g. training data, optimisation objectives, output patterns, and embedded assumptions and translates these into a values-language that human teams can understand, interrogate, and act upon. Where gaps between human and AI values are identified, specific alignment interventions are prescribed.
- 3. Critical Thinking for Human-AI Teams.** The flagship training programme equips teams with structured practices for productive human-AI collaboration. Grounded our emotional intelligence framework and values architecture, the programme builds the specific critical thinking capabilities needed for the new mixed-intelligence workplace: the ability to hold AI recommendations with informed scepticism, to surface values tensions before they generate costly decisions, and to leverage the genuine strengths of AI collaboration without surrendering human values judgement.

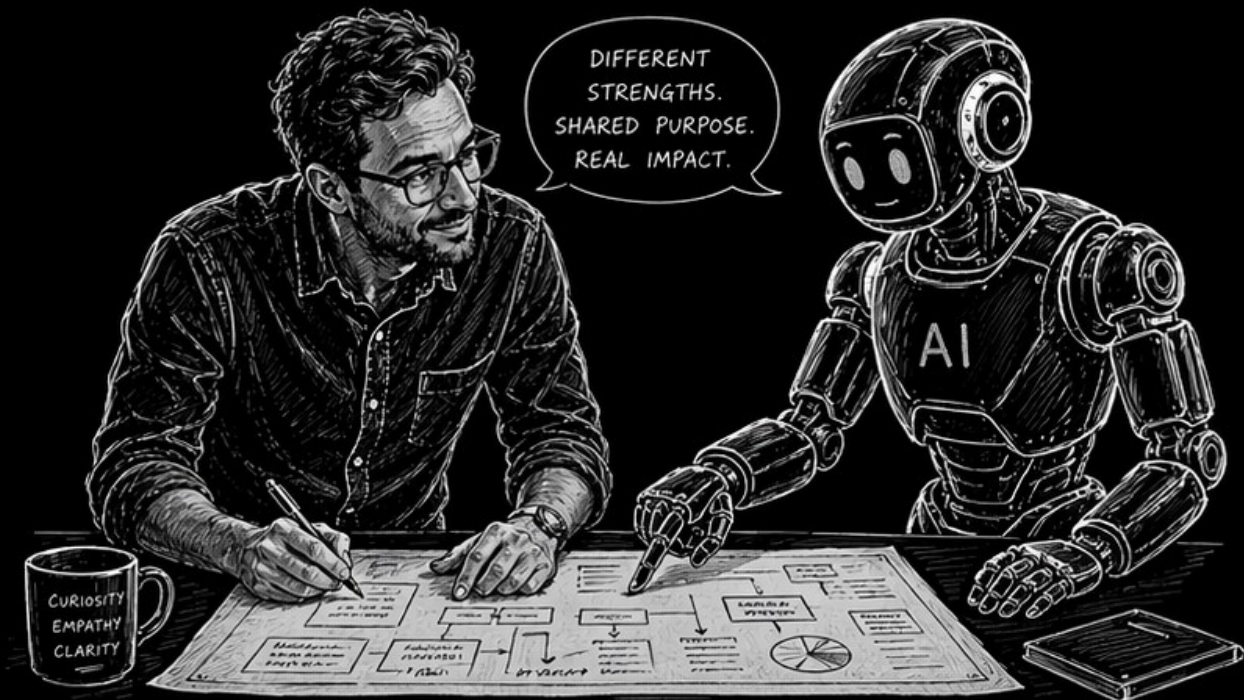
For more information visit www.appliedemotions.com

Appendix: Source Articles

This report draws on the following sources:

- Ranganathan, A. & Ye, X. (2026). "AI doesn't reduce work, it intensifies it." Harvard Business Review.
- BCG/HBR Study (January 2026). AI Brain Fry - prevalence and impact data across 1,488 workers.
- Hancock, J.T., Niederhoffer, K. & Robichaux, A. (2026). "AI-Generated 'Workslop' Is Destroying Productivity" and "Why People Create AI 'Workslop' — and How to Stop It." *Harvard Business Review*, January 2026. Study conducted by Stanford Social Media Lab and BetterUp Labs, surveying 1,150 full-time U.S. desk workers. Jeff Hancock is Harry and Norman Chandler Professor of Communication and Founding Director of the Stanford Social Media Lab. Available at: hbr.org
- Skibba, R. (14 April 2026). "Bosses say AI boosts productivity - workers say they're drowning in 'workslop'". The Guardian.
- Forbes (15 April 2026). "What Is AI Brain Fry, And How Can It Be Avoided?" Bainbridge, L. (1983). "Ironies of Automation." *Automatica*, 19(6), 775–779.
- Cultural Dynamics Strategy & Marketing Ltd. VOCS Dataset - Full-Time Working Population.

Avoid Brain Fry. Protect your high performers. Humanise your AI.



VALUES DRIVEN ALIGNMENT INDEX

Overall Alignment

Excellent Alignment

People
97%

Brand
99%

AI Agents
98%

98%

[Request a Values Diagnostic](#)

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