

From Davos to Delivery

Why AI Anxiety Is Rising Faster Than AI Capability



If you followed the discussions coming out of Davos this year, you could be forgiven for thinking that artificial intelligence is about to upend the labour market overnight.

- The **IMF** warns that up to **60%** of jobs in advanced economies are exposed to AI disruption.
- The **World Economic Forum** elevates adverse AI outcomes into its global risk register.
- Executives speak openly about productivity shocks, displacement, and social instability.

And yet, when you step away from the conference stage and into real organisations, a very different picture emerges.

AI capability is advancing quickly, but **AI impact remains uneven, narrow, and highly dependent on execution.**

What *is* accelerating, however, is **anxiety.**

This gap between perceived threat and delivered reality is becoming one of the most important risks.

What Davos tells us and what it does not

The Davos narrative is not wrong.

- AI will reshape work.
- Some tasks will disappear.
- Some roles will change permanently.

The IMF analysis makes an important distinction that deserves more airtime:

My expectation is that AI affects **tasks**, not entire jobs. **Exposure does not equal replacement.**

Yet headlines compress this into something far more alarming: “AI is coming for jobs.”

From a transformation delivery perspective, this framing matters enormously. Fear could change behaviour long before technology does.

I have seen organisations delay investment, freeze hiring, or quietly stall change programmes, not because the tech failed, but because **leaders could not confidently explain how it would be used, governed, or measured.**

Anxiety thrives in ambiguity.

The real driver of AI anxiety is not capability

If AI were truly replacing work at scale today, the anxiety would be justified.

But even at Davos, there was broad acknowledgement that:

- Most AI deployments remain **pilot-level**
- Productivity gains are **uneven**
- Only a small percentage of organisations report clear ROI

In fact, some surveys referenced around Davos suggest that **more than half of CEOs see little or no financial return from AI investment so far.**

So why the fear? From my perspective, the anxiety comes from three delivery gaps.

1. They talk about intelligence, not implementation

Public debate focuses on how *smart* AI is becoming.

Inside organisations, the real questions are far more basic:

- Who owns the output?
- What happens when it is wrong?
- How do we stop it?
- How much does each decision cost?
- Can we explain it to a regulator, a union, or a customer?

Most AI strategies do not answer these questions upfront, and without delivery structure, AI feels uncontrollable. This creates fear.

2. We overestimate autonomy and underestimate governance

Another Davos theme was the rise of “AI agents” and autonomous systems.

Technically, this is exciting, but operationally, it is destabilising if misunderstood.

Agents are not colleagues.

They are **delegated execution mechanisms**.

From a PMO and risk management perspective, agents require:

- Clear scope
- Decision boundaries
- Escalation paths
- Audit trails
- Performance thresholds

When organisations talk about agents as independent intelligence, anxiety rises.

When they treat them as **managed components of a process**, trust increases.

3. We lack a shared delivery methodology for AI

Perhaps the biggest signal from Davos is not about models or policy, but about **readiness**.

Many governments and firms are investing heavily in AI **without a repeatable structured method** to:

- Decide where to apply it
- Measure success
- Kill initiatives that do not pay back
- Scale what works safely

This is where AI differs from previous technology waves:

- Cloud had reference architectures.
- ERP had implementation playbooks.
- Agile had delivery frameworks.

In many organisations, **AI has enthusiasm, but no method**, and without method, uncertainty rises.

Why anxiety is rising faster than capability

Put these elements together and the pattern becomes clear:

- AI promises are broad and abstract
- Delivery realities are limited
- Leadership expectations are ahead of execution
- With uncertainty, everyone fills the knowledge gaps with fear

The World Economic Forum is right to flag this as a risk, but the risk is not AI itself. It is **poorly governed change**.

What will reduce the anxiety

Across the programmes I have been involved in, delivery and change anxiety falls when four things are present. These apply to all technical cases, but most importantly to AI, due to the many perspectives that exist on the technology, and the level of hype and focus it has.

1. Narrow, visible use cases

- People trust what they can see and understand.
- Quiet improvements to workflows reduce fear more than strategy decks.

2. Clear accountability

- Someone owns the outcome.
- Someone can stop the delivery if necessary.

3. Explicit risk boundaries

- Not everything is automated.
- Humans remain in the loop where judgement matters.

4. Literacy, not evangelism

- Teams understand what the system can and cannot do.
- Uncertainty drops when expectations are realistic.

These are not technical fixes, but delivery disciplines.

The importance of the hybrid operator

One theme echoed at Davos by **Satya Nadella (Microsoft's CEO)**, and one I strongly agree with, is the growing importance of **generalist capability in software and transformation**.

They are the ones who understand:

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- Data architecture
- Product intent
- Delivery sequencing
- Risk management
- Organisational behaviour

AI diffusion depends on this hybrid skillset.

Not because specialists are unimportant, but because **someone must connect decisions across domains** and translate capability into operational reality.

That is where anxiety turns into execution.

From Davos to delivery

This discussion in Davos is useful because it surfaces global signals early. But the work does not happen there. It happens in:

- Backlogs
- Steering committees
- Pilot reviews
- Budget decisions
- Kill-or-scale moments

If AI anxiety is rising faster than AI capability, the solution is not to slow innovation. It is to **improve delivery**.

That is how diffusion happens.

And diffusion, not hype, is what will determine whether AI becomes a productivity tool or a persistent source of fear.

This article is based on publicly available reporting and discussions from Davos, the IMF, and the World Economic Forum, combined with my own experience delivering large-scale digital and AI-enabled transformation programmes.

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