Upwork's Future Workforce Index 2026: How AI is Redefining the Value of Work as Skilled Freelancing Accelerates

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New research shows the share of skilled knowledge workers who freelance jumped from 28% to 38% in one year, as AI raises the premium on judgment-driven work and pressures execution tasks

PALO ALTO, Calif., July 14, 2026 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- Upwork Inc. (Nasdaq: UPWK), the world's human and AI-powered work marketplace, today released its second annual Future Workforce Index 2026, a study of 2,400 U.S.-based skilled knowledge workers combined with Upwork Marketplace platform data. The research finds that over 1 in 3 skilled U.S. knowledge workers now freelance, up from roughly 1 in 4 a year ago, as AI restructures which work commands a premium.

The Future Workforce Index is Upwork’s annual research report on the future of work, exploring how AI adoption, workforce models, and changing career preferences are reshaping skilled work. Key findings from the report include:

- **Not all AI work is gaining value, and the split comes down to judgment, not just usage.** Freelancers performing AI work on the Upwork Marketplace earn 34% more per hour than those not incorporating AI, but not all AI work is becoming more valuable. For example, generative AI and creative production work saw 90% year-over-year growth in contract starts while per-contract earnings declined 13%, suggesting that lower-complexity AI execution may become less lucrative as it scales.
- **Complex AI-augmented work is driving higher earnings and new roles**. Freelancers doing more complex work with AI saw earnings increase 45% year-over-year. AI-augmented professional services — where domain experts integrate AI into established fields — grew 72% in volume with earnings rising 22%. The research points to the early emergence of the "AI Orchestrator": a professional who connects AI tools to domain expertise, applies human judgment, and turns AI-enabled execution into business outcomes.
- **Skilled freelancing is accelerating.** Skilled freelancers now represent 38% of U.S. knowledge workers, up from 28% the prior year. At the same time, 58% of full-time employees now say they are considering freelancing, up from 36% the prior year. This shift suggests workers are seeking out more control over how they build expertise, choose projects, and monetize their capabilities as AI reshapes which skills are valuable.

Freelancers are among the fastest adopters of new tools, which makes their earnings and behavior a reliable early signal for where the broader labor market is heading. The findings suggest that the next phase of AI adoption will depend less on deploying more tools and more on developing and accessing the human expertise required to make them useful.

"There is a puzzle in the AI data: adoption is everywhere, but productivity gains are still hard to see. In a recent survey my colleagues and I conducted of nearly 6,000 executives, most firms reported little measurable impact from AI so far," said Nick Bloom, Professor of Economics at Stanford University and member of Upwork’s Economic Advisory Council. "Upwork's data adds an important clue. The value is not showing up evenly; it is concentrated in more complex work where people are applying expertise, judgment, and business context on top of AI."

The findings carry implications for both businesses and workers.

“As AI agents continue to proliferate, the advantage for talent will come from becoming an AI Orchestrator, someone that can direct, integrate, and be accountable for agents across complex workflows,” said Jennifer Brett, PhD, who joins Upwork as its new Managing Director of the Upwork Research Institute.

Brett, who previously held senior research and insights roles at Attentive, LinkedIn, and Google, will lead the Institute's research agenda on the future of work, AI's role in workforce transformation, and the evolving dynamics of the independent talent economy.

“For businesses, giving employees access to AI tools is only the first step. The real work is redesigning workflows, identifying skill gaps, and investing in employee learning to close those gaps and deliver results. Companies that treat AI as a technology rollout rather than a talent strategy will struggle to close the gap between adoption and outcomes,” Brett adds.

Explore the full findings of the Future Workforce Index here.

Methodology
The Future Workforce Index 2026 is based on a survey of 2,400 U.S.-based skilled workers conducted March–April 2026. Skilled workers were determined by targeting a representative sample of U.S. workers and limiting participants to those working above the administrative level across skilled organizational functions with earnings above a minimum threshold, as determined by analyzing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics salary data. The margin of error is 2% at the 95% confidence level. The report also draws on Upwork platform data, including AI-related work categories, contract starts, hourly earnings, and YoY earnings trends, using an LLM-based pipeline to identify and classify AI-related jobs by how AI is being used.

About the Upwork Research Institute

The Upwork Research Institute is committed to studying fundamental shifts in the workforce and providing business leaders with the tools and insights they need to navigate the present while preparing their organizations for the future. Using proprietary platform data, global survey research, and academic collaborations, the Institute produces evidence-based insights to help create the blueprint for the new way of work. Learn more at upwork.com/research.

About Upwork Inc.
Upwork Inc.'s (Nasdaq: UPWK) family of companies connects businesses with global, AI-enabled talent across every contingent work type including freelance, fractional, and payrolled. This portfolio includes the Upwork Marketplace, which connects businesses with on-demand access to highly skilled talent across the globe, and Lifted, which provides a purpose-built solution for enterprise organizations to source, contract, manage, and pay talent across the full spectrum of contingent work. From Fortune 100 enterprises to entrepreneurs, businesses rely on Upwork Inc. to find and hire expert talent, leverage AI-powered work solutions, and drive business transformation. With access to professionals spanning more than 10,000 skills across AI & machine learning, software development, sales & marketing, customer support, finance & accounting, and more, the Upwork family of companies enables businesses of all sizes to scale, innovate, and transform their workforces for the age of AI and beyond.

Since its founding, Upwork Inc. has facilitated more than $30 billion in total transactions and services as it fulfills its purpose to create opportunity in every era of work. Learn more about the Upwork Marketplace at upwork.com and follow on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X; and learn more about Lifted at go-lifted.com.

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