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Do We Need to Understand AI If We Use It? Opinion - On the Findings of the 2026 Global AI Literacy Study by AI Edutainment GmbH

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The robotics community has spent a decade debating whether machines are ready for people. A new global study suggests we have been asking the wrong question. The 2026 AI Literacy Study, built on four original surveys conducted between February and May 2026 across students, teachers, small and mid-sized businesses, and professionals aged 45 and older - plus 200 recorded interviews with AI practitioners - arrives at a conclusion that should unsettle anyone deploying automation: the people work with AI without understanding the technology, and the institutions around them have largely decided not to pay attention, let alone act.

The study's most quotable experiment is also its smallest. The researchers approached twenty-seven randomly chosen people whose LinkedIn titles read "AI Expert" or "AI Keynote Speaker" and asked a single question: "What kind of AI or machine learning are you focused on?" Twenty of them answered: ChatGPT. That anecdote sits on top of harder data - LinkedIn members adding AI skills to their profiles have grown twenty-fold globally since 2016 (in some countries, like the UAE, eighty-fold) - and it frames the study's central distinction: the industry has confused fluency, proficiency with a vendor's product, with literacy, an understanding of what the technology is, what it costs, and where and why it fails. Literacy empowers. Fluency breeds dependency on ecosystems that might be replaced.

The same paradox, four times over

What makes the study worth reading is that it measured the same phenomenon in four populations and got the same shape back each time. Among surveyed teachers, 86% use ChatGPT or a comparable model, yet only 11% call their AI knowledge advanced and a mere 7% recognize what an open-weight model is - the practitioner paradox. Among SMEs, only 3.3% use no AI at all, 91% call it strategically vital, and 26.7% already run agentic AI in production. Yet when asked what their entire workforce most needs to learn, the top answer, chosen by 60%, was: what is AI, actually? The authors call this the deployment paradox. The youth data contains the study's most striking single number. Asked their

leading worry about AI, young respondents did not choose job loss (27.7%) or deepfakes. They chose losing critical thinking and creativity - 47.3%. The most AI-immersed generation in history has independently arrived at the cognitive-science literature's own central concern, worrying about what the tool does to their minds even as their usage climbs. One European student summarized the institutional response: "We want to learn, but our teachers behave as if AI wasn't there. So, we are forced to learn from TikTok and Instagram."

The study doesn't just offer a picture of how different populations use AI. It also clears up several points of confusion

about AI and its implementation, drawing on the authors' collective real-world experience. Can the hallucinations in LLMs be fixed? Is human-AI alignment even possible? What are the cost drivers that can make or break a company's AI business case? And what should HR practitioners or experienced professionals without a computer science degree consider when they move full speed into the world of AI and smart machines?

The blind spot AI practitioners should care about

The SME section surfaced a finding I would nominate as the most consequential for developing an automation roadmap. Respondents rank the knowledge drain from an aging workforce among their top challenges, and 51.3% plan to use AI as a substitute in certain roles. Yet only 36% see AI as a tool to capture and codify expert knowledge before it retires. The study names this the knowledge-capture blind spot: firms are automating away the people whose tacit knowledge is the one thing the automation cannot replicate - a point reinforced by Stanford payroll data showing early-career employment in AI-exposed roles down 13–16% since late 2022 while experienced workers held steady.

The study's answer is not a framework but a real example: a family-owned European textile-machinery OEM whose retiring workers had never documented how they did what they did. The AI project began as archaeology - video capture of 47 factory jobs, workflow reconstruction with the workers themselves, training materials (built with the help of genAI), and only then automation and avatars of the firm's best people. A knowledge-preservation project in which AI happened to be the instrument. That sequencing - AI tool last - is the study's quiet manifesto.

Equally original is a warning aimed at HR departments that only a few researchers seem to be issuing: large language models have measurably different "personalities" - consistent patterns in tone, agreeableness, and risk appetite. A company running one model in customer service, another in engineering, and a third in finance has hired three colleagues with three different temperaments, and possesses no instrument for managing the culture of a blended human-machine team. As organizations become what the study calls elastic - humans working alongside fleets of agents, with Argentina now drafting law for corporations with no humans at all - the auditor's question "who approved this?" increasingly returns the answer: the AI did.

Silence as a data point

One finding is delivered almost in passing, as it is shaped by who chose to respond to the surveys. The surveys were sent out globally. The majority of respondents resided in the US, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf; Europeans barely answered. The EU accounts for 4.8% of SME responses; only ten European students participated. The authors treat this silence itself as evidence, consistent with adoption data showing roughly 34% of US firms using AI against an EU average near 20% - and they pair it with a sharper irony: the jurisdiction with the world's highest AI compliance costs is also the one whose central bank and the OECD prescribe AI adoption as the only remedy for a shrinking workforce. Meanwhile, EU regulation has produced the absurdity that European firms have easier open-weight access to Chinese frontier models than to Meta's American ones.

The study is not neutral; it is partly a manifesto of those who wrote it - and the authors are open about that. But its refusal to wait for AI policy or a change of attitude in the large AI labs is bracing. Its recommendations focus on bottom-up AI implementation and learning despite the lack of institutional response. A single teacher introducing a self-developed AI tool that coaches students to write better essays without handing them "ready-to-copy" responses is, in miniature, an example of AI strategy and governance implemented well. A sixteen-year-old writing to hundreds of AI and quantum computing professionals to receive three responses - and building "Girls in Quantum," a nonprofit of eight thousand girls learning about AI and quantum technologies - is another example that people of all ages can step up and shape their future. An SME training its workforce with avatars modelled on its best employees is yet another case of a positive AI implementation. The closing line of the study's abstract supports these examples and states its major theme: AI today is not a technology issue. It is a leadership issue.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.