

THE EDGE OF WHAT'S NEXT: IRI'S QUARTERLY TRENDS ANALYZER



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About The Trends Analyzer

The Edge of What's Next examines the strategic environment in which innovation and R&D take place and flags up potential trends that you should factor into your strategic planning. At the end of each quarter, trends are examined by the IRI Foresights Advisory Board and assessed for their potential impact on innovation. In this report, key trends are described and vital questions you should ask yourself as you conduct your strategic planning are listed. In addition, we include some interesting possibilities (weak signals') at the end of the report that we will keep an eye on to see if they will rise to the level of a bigger, more impactful trend.

Innovation Research Interchange (formerly the Industrial Research Institute) is an inclusive membership organization with hundreds of global members in private-sector companies and federally funded laboratories. Founded in 1938, we lead and advance the field of innovation management by creating contemporary practices. Some of the world's most widely adopted models – such as “open innovation”, “front end of innovation”, and “stage-gate” – were born from the work of our members. We value strength in cooperation and partner with other organizations at the forefront of developments in innovation management, creating a hub for all to convene and contribute in an experimental, noncompetitive, and noncommercial environment. The IRI is a division of the National Association of Manufacturers.

July 2026 Trends

1

AI Backlash and the
Reassertion of Human
Value

2

The Decline of
Institutional Knowledge
Platforms

3

The AI Infrastructure
Backlash



AI BACKLASH AND THE REASSERTION OF HUMAN VALUE

Growing public pushback against artificial intelligence is beginning to emerge as a broader cultural and workforce trend, particularly among younger generations entering the labor market. What began as isolated reactions to AI-focused commencement speeches has evolved into a wider expression of anxiety around automation, job displacement, and the perception that technological change is moving faster than workers and institutions can adapt.

The level of complexity of these changes makes it difficult to anticipate the impacts and take steps to adapt. As companies rapidly integrate AI into knowledge work, many graduates increasingly view technology not simply as a productivity tool, but as a force that may narrow entry-level opportunities, reduce human creativity, and weaken professional autonomy.

For R&D organizations, this signals a potentially important shift: resistance to AI may increasingly come from the very talent pools companies are looking to tap into. As adoption accelerates, R&D leaders may face growing pressure to demonstrate that AI augments human capability rather than replaces it. This could push innovation strategies toward more human-centered AI systems, greater transparency in deployment, and tools designed to preserve creativity, judgment, and collaboration alongside efficiency gains.



LEARN MORE

- [Booing Commencement Speakers Over AI is Becoming a Trend](#) (*New York Magazine*)
- [Students Keep Booing AI At Graduation Speeches This Year](#) (*Fast Company*)
- [The Growing Anxiety of AI, Jobs, and The Future](#) (*The New York Times*)
- [Gen Z's AI Backlash is Growing Louder](#) (*Business Insider*)



ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

1

How do we preserve the foundational skills and scientific judgment that early-career employees have traditionally developed through hands-on work?

2

How should R&D organizations redesign career paths and mentorship to develop future technical leaders in an AI-enabled workplace?

3

What uniquely human capabilities will distinguish the most successful scientists and engineers as AI becomes embedded in the R&D process?

4

How do we ensure AI augments human creativity, judgment, and problem-solving rather than diminishes them?

5

How should R&D leaders communicate the opportunities and limitations of AI in a way that builds confidence rather than fear among current and future talent?



THE DECLINE OF INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE PLATFORMS

Growing financial pressure, the increased pace of change, changing media consumption habits, and the rapid expansion of AI-generated content are beginning to reshape the landscape of academic and professional publishing. The closure of long-standing publications, reductions in journal subscriptions, and increasing concerns around information overload reflect broader strain on traditional knowledge institutions that historically served as trusted sources of expertise and research validation.

At the same time, AI tools are dramatically increasing the volume and speed of content generation, making it more difficult for organizations to distinguish high-quality insight from low-value or unreliable information. Confirmation bias is also proliferating with AI creating siloed echo chambers. As audiences shift toward faster, more fragmented digital channels and soundbite science, traditional journals and institutional publishing models are facing pressure to prove relevance, sustainability, and credibility in a rapidly changing information environment.

For R&D organizations, this trend raises important questions about how knowledge is sourced, validated, and shared. Scientific literature, peer-reviewed journals, and industry publications have long played a central role in informing innovation strategy and technical development.



THE DECLINE OF INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE PLATFORMS (CONT.)

If trust in these systems weakens—or if valuable research becomes harder to identify amid growing content saturation—R&D leaders may need to place greater emphasis on internal expertise networks, direct collaboration, and stronger validation processes. As the knowledge ecosystem becomes more decentralized and AI-generated information proliferates, the ability to filter signals from noise may become an increasingly important competitive capability.

LEARN MORE

- [MIT to Close Long Running Business Journal](#) (*Inside Higher Ed*)
- [Harvard Center for Latin American Studies Cuts Revista Magazine Due to Budget](#) (*The Crimson*)
- [Journal Subscription Cancellations in 2026](#) (Duke University)
- [Farewell to the Sloan Management Review: Now What For Management Ideas?](#) (Rita McGrath's Thought Sparks)



ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

1

How do organizations ensure the next generation of scientists understand the "why" behind discoveries, not just the AI-generated answer?

2

Could AI accelerate scientific discovery while simultaneously weakening the development of scientific expertise for your organization?

3

Are organizations placing too much emphasis on finding solutions and not enough on understanding the underlying science that makes those solutions possible?

4

How should R&D organizations redesign learning and mentorship if AI changes how scientists learn, practice, and develop expertise?

5

How do organizations preserve scientific curiosity in a world that is increasingly optimized for fast answers?



THE AI INFRASTRUCTURE BACKLASH

A growing tension is emerging around the expansion of AI infrastructure. While governments and technology companies are moving quickly to build the data centers needed to support AI growth, many local communities are pushing back. Data centers—once seen as quiet, behind-the-scenes infrastructure—are now drawing attention over concerns about energy use, water consumption, environmental impact, land use, and rising utility costs. Recent polling suggests that a large majority of Americans oppose having a data center built in their community, reflecting how quickly sentiment has shifted with data centers coming to represent the advances in technology that many Americans fear will take their jobs.

As a result, projects are facing more delays, opposition, and in some cases, new regulatory hurdles. As computing demand grows, so does the need for land, power, water, and transmission infrastructure, making AI expansion not just a technology issue, but a local and political one as well.

For R&D organizations, this introduces a new constraint to planning. Assumptions around abundant, low-cost computing may not hold everywhere, and infrastructure availability could start to influence where and how AI-enabled innovation happens. Increasingly, R&D leaders will need to factor in not just what can be built technically, but what can realistically be supported in the physical world.



LEARN MORE

- [7 out of 10 Americans Oppose Data Centers Being Built in Their Communities](#) (*The Washington Post*)
- [Data Centers are Wildly Unpopular: New Poll Shows](#) (Semafor)
- [Will the Data Center Halt AI's Advance?](#) (*The Week*)
- [Americans Don't Know How to Fight AI. So They're Fighting Data Centers](#) (Vox)



ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

1

How can organizations earn and maintain public trust as they expand AI infrastructure and capabilities?

2

How should R&D organizations balance the drive for AI innovation with growing concerns about energy use, water resources, and community impact?

3

Could access to computing power, energy, and AI infrastructure become the next major competitive advantage in R&D?

4

Could investments in AI infrastructure become an opportunity to modernize energy and utility systems rather than simply increase demand?

5

What role should R&D leaders play in shaping not only the technologies they develop, but also the societal systems needed to support them?

6

As the costs of using AI grow how can it be deployed efficiently and effectively in the organization?



ADDITIONAL TRENDS TO WATCH:

- Americans are Sick of High Prices. Companies are Finally Doing Something About It (*The Wall Street Journal*)
- Inflation is At a Three-Year High- and Americans are burning through their savings (MSN)
- China and the Era of Critical Minerals Diplomacy (*The Financial Times*)
- Chevron Entered the AI Power Business: The Oil Patch Won't Be the Same (Investor's Business Daily)
- US-China Scientific Decoupling: The Hidden Costs of Geopolitical Rivalry (*South China Morning Post*)



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