VOICES OF GEN Z

The AI Paradox

More Exposure, Less Confidence Among Gen Z

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Executive Summary

Gen Z, the generation most likely to enter or grow within the workforce over the next decade, is navigating a complex relationship with artificial intelligence (AI) that is marked by plateauing use, declining optimism and growing concern about its impact. While Gen Zers acknowledge AI's relevance and are curious about it, they remain cautious about its value and wary of its consequences.

These findings are from a new survey by the Walton Family Foundation, GSV Ventures and Gallup which builds on prior research about Gen Z's perceptions of generative AI, defined for this study as technology capable of creating new content based on what you tell it to do, such as writing, brainstorming or creating images. The survey is the latest in the Voices of Gen Z study and captures the attitudes and experiences of more than 1,500 14- to 29-year-olds.

> **Just over half of Gen Z report using generative AI at least weekly — essentially unchanged from 2025. This leveling off stands in contrast to broader market trends, where worker access to AI rose by 50% in 2025 and the share of work hours spent using generative AI climbed from 4.1% to 5.7% in the same period.[1] The divergence suggests that while organizations are expanding AI infrastructure, meaningful adoption among younger people remains uneven and is not growing on its own.**

More concerning than flat adoption is a measurable shift in Gen Z's sentiment toward AI. Negative emotions have intensified over the past year: Excitement for AI dropped 14 percentage points, hopefulness fell nine points and anger rose by nine points. Meanwhile, anxiety held steady, affecting four in 10 Gen Zers. Even daily AI users, who generally hold more favorable views of these technologies, have become less positive over the past year.

Underlying this growing skepticism are concerns about AI's impact on core cognitive and professional skills. Gen Z remains unconvinced that AI enhances creativity, critical thinking or even efficiency. The majority believe AI-driven efficiency may come at a cost, particularly to learning.

These concerns extend into the workplace, where employed Gen Zers express wariness. Nearly half believe the risks of AI outweigh its benefits, and trust in AI-assisted work is far lower than in human-only output. This comes amid broader labor market uncertainty, where AI is frequently discussed as both a productivity enhancer and a potential disruptor of entry-level roles, which are positions disproportionately held by younger workers.

Despite their reticence to engage with AI, Gen Z students are increasingly clear-eyed about what the future demands: An increased majority now agree they will need AI skills for postsecondary education, and most believe they will be adequately prepared.

1 Bick, A., Blandin, A., & Deming, D. (2025, November 13). The State of Generative AI Adoption in 2025. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2025/nov/state-generative-ai-adoption-2025

Key Findings

1. **Gen Z's use of AI in everyday life has remained largely stable over the past year.** Just over half of 14- to 29-year-olds say they use AI either daily (22%) or weekly (29%), while 11% report using it monthly, 20% every few months and 19% say they never use it.

2. **The excitement (22%) and hopefulness (18%) that Gen Zers feel about using AI were already low last year** and declined sharply this year, while anger (31%) increased and anxiety (42%) remained steady. Curiosity about AI (49%) is the most strongly felt emotion of the five measured.

3. **Frequent Gen Z AI users report substantially more positive emotions** about it than those who never use it, but even daily users' positivity has declined significantly over the past year. Among daily users, 69% now say they feel curious, 44% excited and 38% hopeful, compared with 28%, 4% and 2%, respectively, among non-users.

4. **Gen Z remains skeptical of AI's positive impact on core skills and productivity.** They are split on its ability to help them search for accurate information, while pluralities say it will do more harm than good for creativity (38%) and critical thinking (42%). Confidence in AI-driven efficiency has declined, with agreement that it helps complete work faster down 10 points to 56%, and that it speeds up learning dropping seven points to 46%.

5. **Young adults in the workforce are significantly more likely to view AI as a risk than a benefit in the workplace.** Nearly half (48%) say the risks outweigh the benefits, compared with just 15% who say the opposite, while 37% see the risks and benefits as equal.

6. **Just over half of Gen Z students (52%) think they will need to know how to use AI for postsecondary education,** marking a five-point increase since 2025. Forty-eight percent believe AI skills will be necessary for their future careers.

7. **The majority of Gen Z K-12 students (56%) now agree or strongly agree that they will have the skills to use AI in their daily lives after high school,** marking a 12-point increase from last year.

Detailed Findings

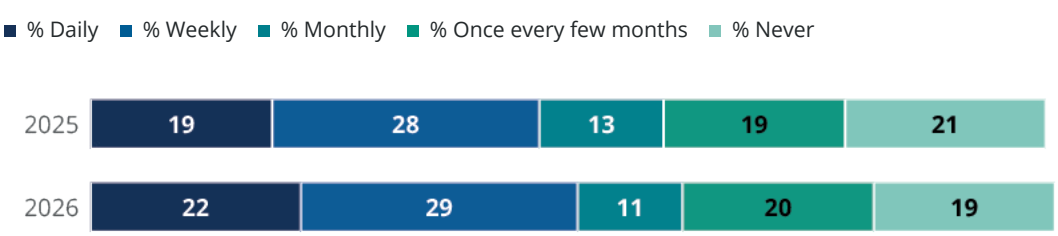
AI adoption among Gen Z is similar to 2025 levels

Despite generative AI advancements, Gen Z's adoption of it in their daily lives is largely unchanged from 2025, with just over half of 14- to 29-year-olds reporting that they now use AI every day (22%) or weekly (29%). Another 11% of Gen Zers say they employ AI monthly and 20% say they use it once every few months, while 19% say they never use it. These findings are statistically similar to 2025.

FIGURE 1

Frequency of Gen Z's Artificial Intelligence Use, 2025 and 2026

In your daily life, how often, if at all, do you use artificial intelligence?



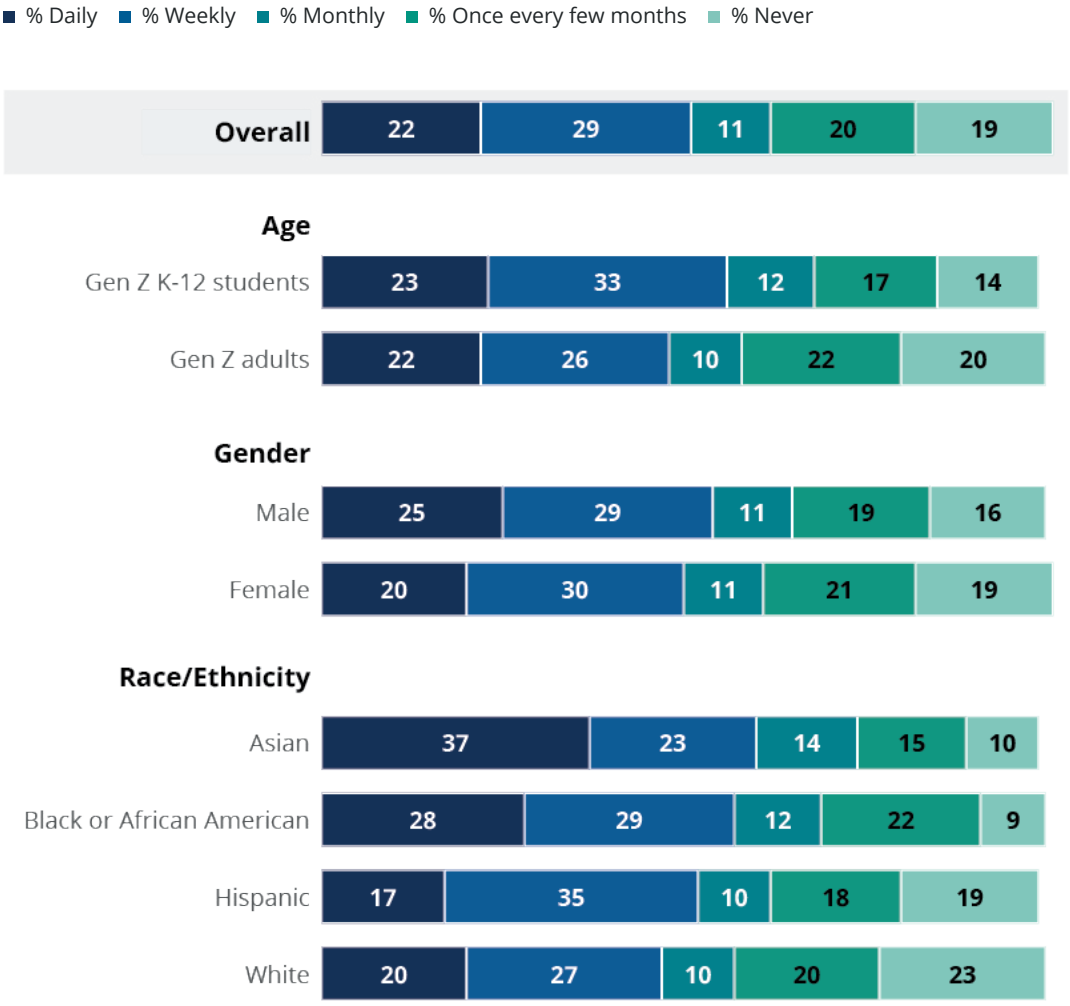
Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

AI adoption in daily life remains higher among certain Gen Z subgroups than others. Six in 10 Asian Gen Zers and nearly as many Black Gen Zers (57%) use AI on at least a weekly basis, compared with about half of their White (47%) and Hispanic (52%) peers. Likewise, Gen Z K-12 students are more likely than their adult counterparts to report at least weekly AI use (56% vs. 48%, respectively). Male Gen Zers (54%) also report higher AI use than female Gen Zers (50%).

FIGURE 2

Frequency of Gen Z's Artificial Intelligence Use, by Demographic Subgroup

In your daily life, how often, if at all, do you use artificial intelligence?



Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

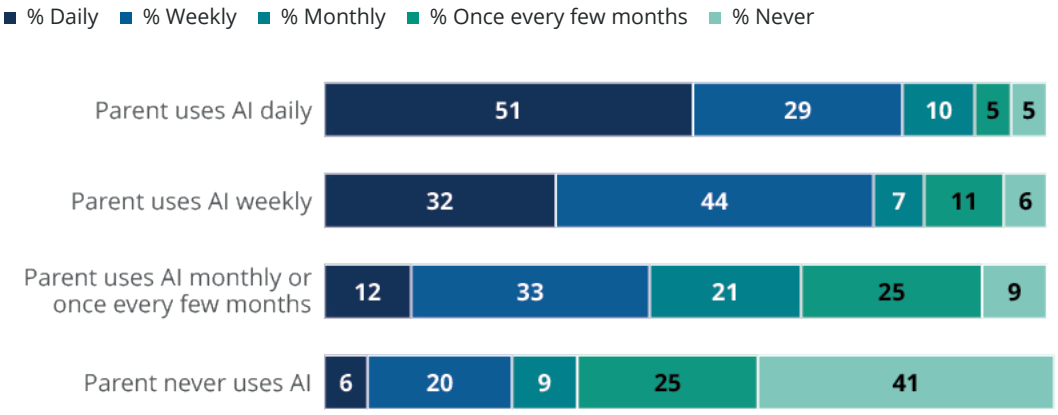
The extent to which Gen Z K-12 students use AI is closely tied to parental use. Frequent parental use is associated with significantly higher daily and weekly use among their children, while children of non-users are far more likely to report infrequent or no use.

FIGURE 3

Gen Z K-12 Children's Use of Artificial Intelligence Linked to Parents' Use

In your daily life, how often, if at all, do you use artificial intelligence?

Based on how often respondent's parent uses AI



Note: Among Gen Z K-12 children. Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

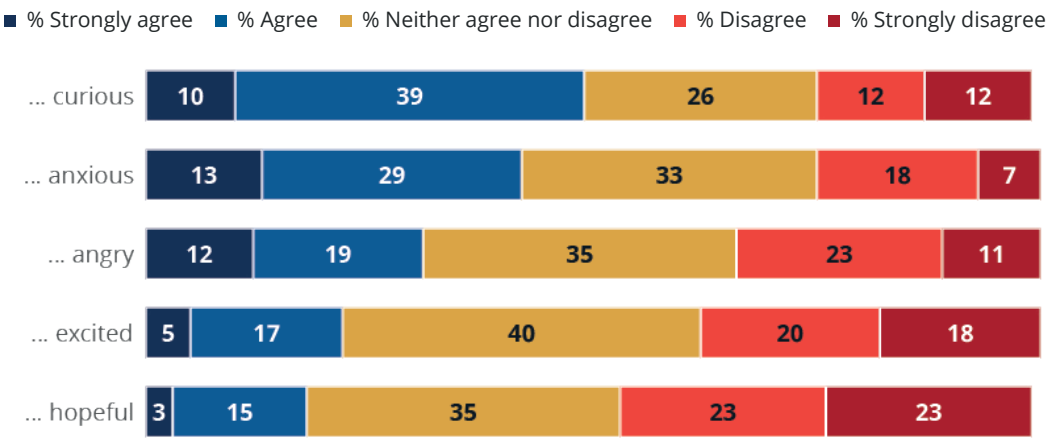
While AI adoption has not increased, negative sentiment has

When asked how AI makes them feel across five dimensions — curiosity, anxiety, anger, excitement and hopefulness — Gen Zers express mixed emotions. While curiosity stands out as the most common response (49% "agree" or "strongly agree" it evokes this feeling), anxiety (42%) and anger (31%) closely follow. Fewer report positive emotions such as excitement (22%) or hope (18%).

FIGURE 4

Gen Zers' Feelings About Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence makes me ...



Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

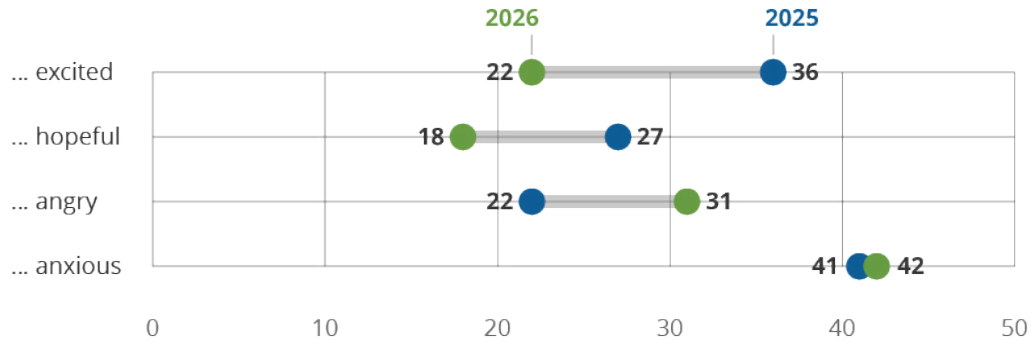
Over the past year, Gen Zers' sentiment toward AI has grown significantly more negative on three of the four emotions measured in both years. Excitement for AI has dropped 14 percentage points since 2025 and hopefulness has fallen nine points, while anger has increased nine points. At the same time, anxiety about AI is steady.

FIGURE 5

Gen Zers' Feelings About Artificial Intelligence Have Worsened

Artificial intelligence makes me ...

% Strongly agree + Agree



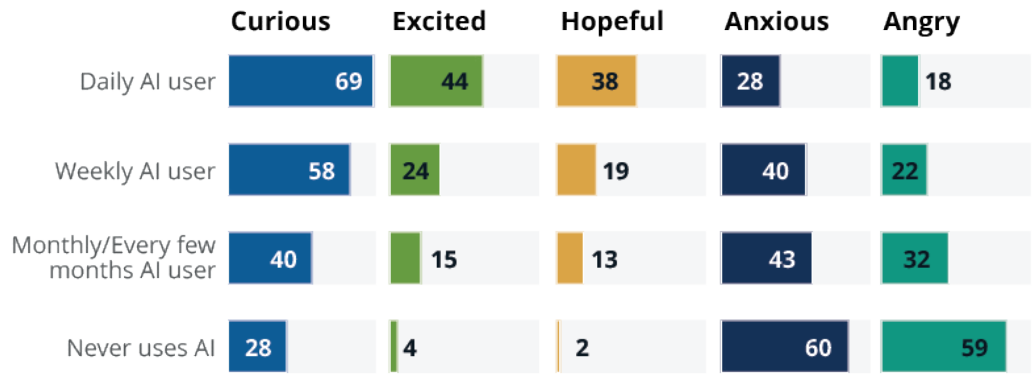
Gen Zers' feelings about AI are closely tied to how frequently they use it. Less-frequent AI users report notably lower positive sentiment and higher negative sentiment than their peers who use AI more frequently. This underscores a strong relationship between familiarity with AI and more favorable perceptions. Among daily users, 69% report feeling curious, 44% excited and 38% hopeful. This compares with 28% of those who never use AI agreeing they are curious, 4% excited and 2% hopeful. Meanwhile, negative emotions are far more prevalent among non-users, with 60% reporting anxiety and 59% anger, compared with 28% and 18%, respectively, among daily users.

FIGURE 6

Gen Zers' Feelings About Artificial Intelligence Tied to Frequency of Use

Artificial intelligence makes me ...

% Strongly agree + Agree



> **While Gen Zers who use AI more frequently tend to view it more positively than their peers who use it less, this has not improved their perception of the technology year-over-year.**

Rather, Gen Zers who report using AI daily are less excited than they were last year (down 18 points) and less hopeful about it (down 11 points). Their anxiety and anger about AI are statistically similar to last year's levels.

Gen Z's increased skepticism about AI may be related to concerns about potential negative effects on work and learning

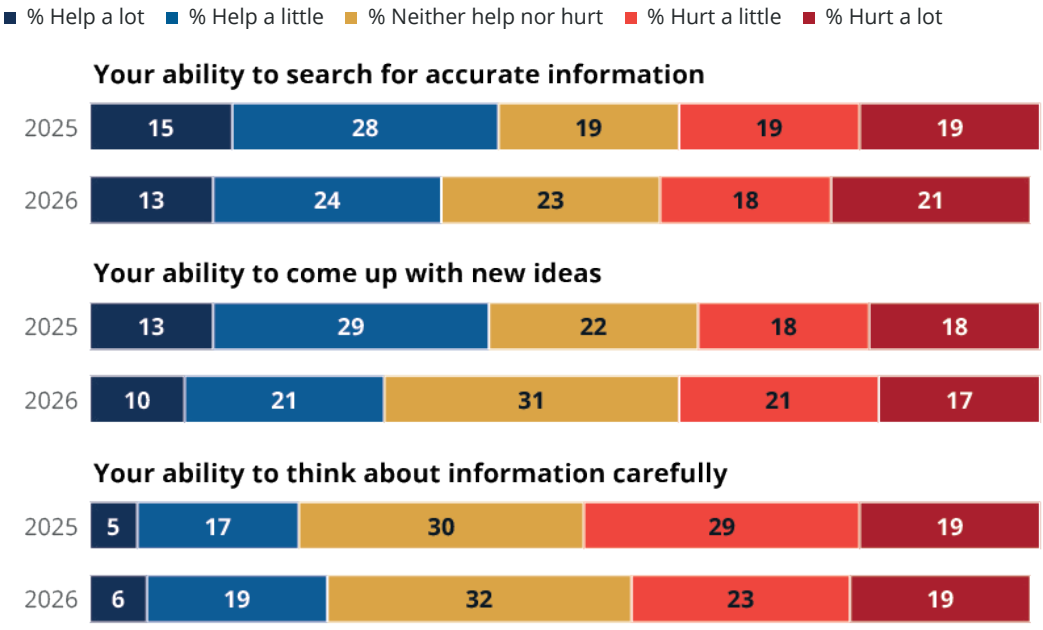
Uncertainty about AI may reflect concerns about its perceived impact on learning and workplace outcomes. Gen Zers are unconvinced that artificial intelligence will help them search for accurate information, come up with new ideas and think carefully about information. They are divided in their views of AI's helpfulness in searching for information, while pluralities believe the technology will hurt rather than help them with creativity (38%) and critical thinking (42%).

Since 2025, Gen Z's perceptions of AI's impact in these areas have shifted. Fewer now believe AI will meaningfully improve their ability to search for information or generate new ideas. Concerns about AI's impact on critical thinking, however, are not significantly different than in 2025.

FIGURE 7

Perceived Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Information Use, Creativity and Critical Thinking Among Gen Z

How much do you think artificial intelligence will help or hurt each of the following aspects of your lives?

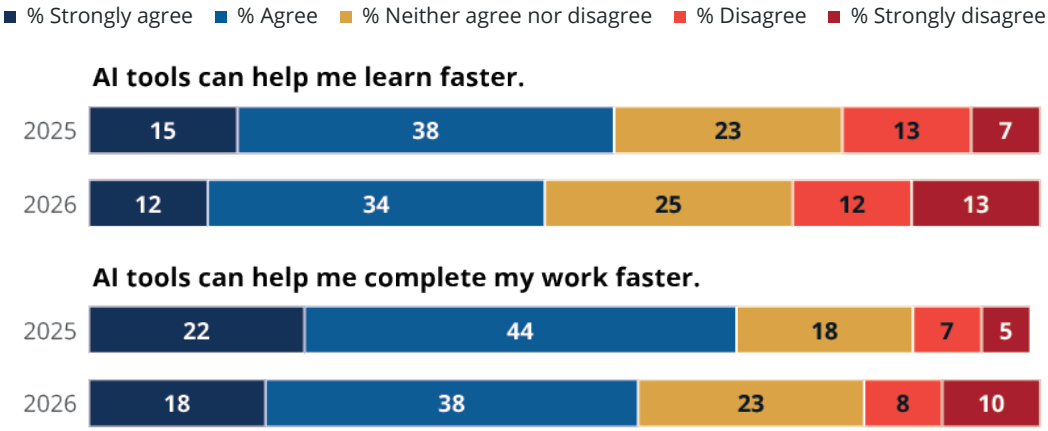


Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

Gen Zers are less inclined than they were in 2025 to believe AI improves efficiency in learning and completing tasks. The 56% of Gen Z who now agree that AI tools can help expedite work is down 10 points, while agreement that AI can accelerate learning has fallen seven points, to 46%.

FIGURE 8

Perceived Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Efficiency Among Gen Z



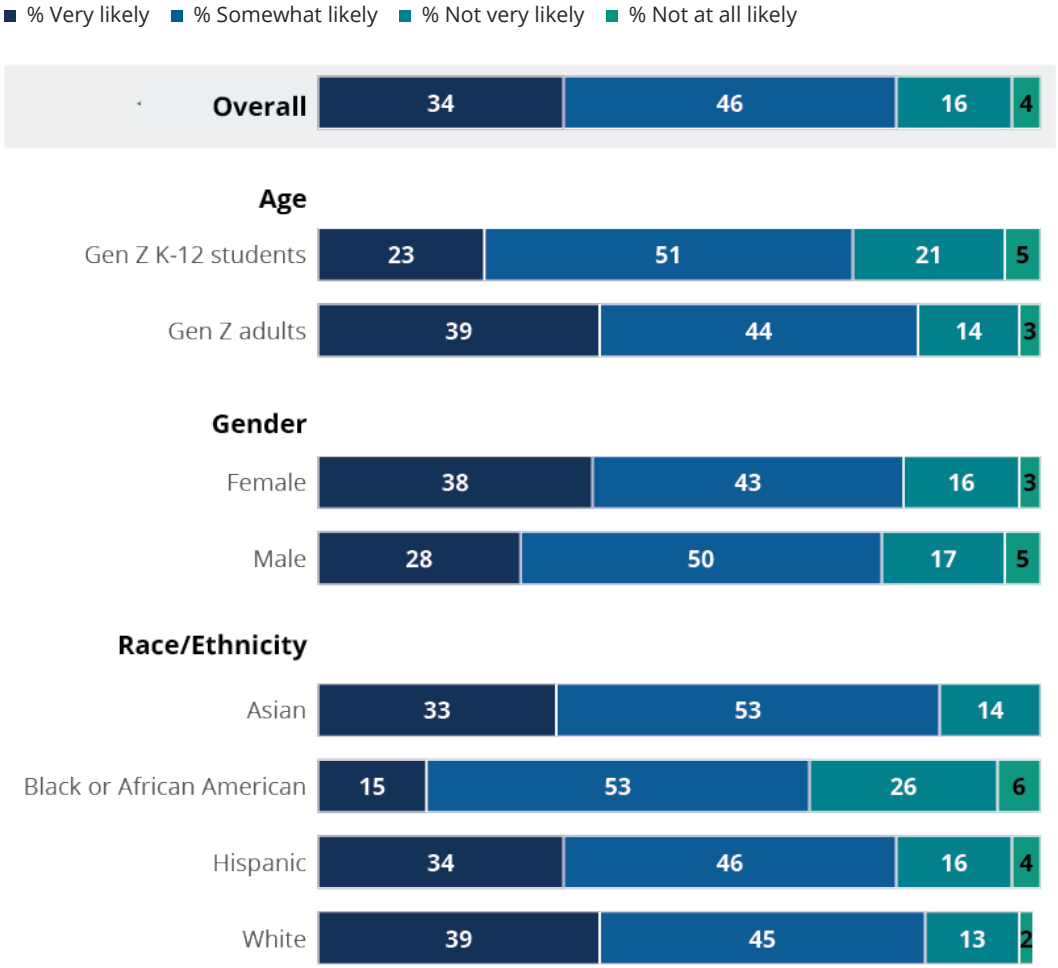
Note: Those with no opinion are not shown.

Gen Zers are questioning whether AI's short-term conveniences come at the expense of their long-term development. Eight in 10 Gen Zers say it is very (34%) or somewhat (46%) likely that using AI tools will make it more difficult for them to learn in the future. Younger, male and Black Gen Zers are much less inclined than their peers to say it is very likely that these tools will cause learning to become more difficult in the future.

FIGURE 9

Gen Z Perceptions That Artificial Intelligence Will Make Future Learning More Difficult

How likely is it that AI designed to mainly complete tasks faster will make learning more difficult in the future?



Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

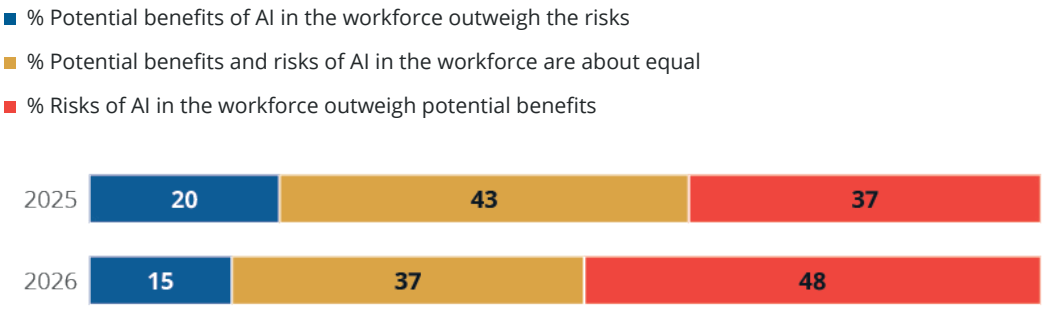
Similar skepticism colors how employed Gen Zers view AI's role in their professional lives. Gen Z workers are more than three times as likely to say the risks of AI in the workforce are greater than the potential benefits.

Nearly half (48%) say the risks outweigh the benefits, compared with 15% who believe the opposite, while 37% view them as roughly equal. This reflects a more negative outlook than a year ago, when 37% saw greater risks and 20% saw greater benefits.

FIGURE 10

Gen Z Workers' Perceptions of Risks vs. Benefits of Artificial Intelligence in Workforce

Which of the following comes closest to your opinion about artificial intelligence?



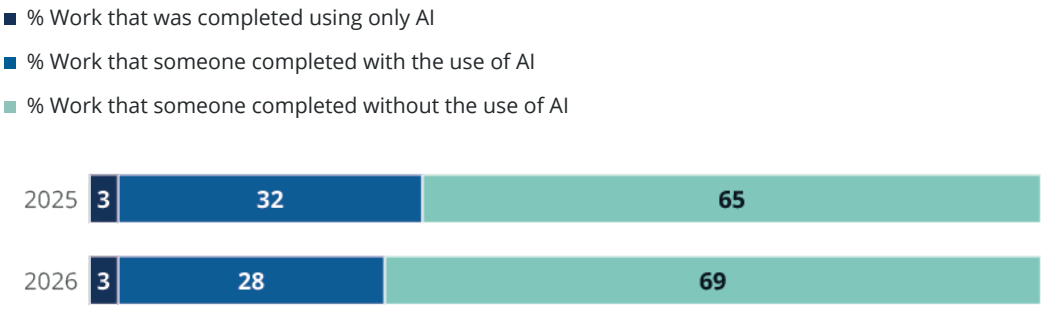
Note: Among employed Gen Zers

Gen Z workers remain skeptical of AI's role in producing reliable work, with more confidence placed in human-only output than in AI-assisted contributions. About seven in 10 workers (69%) say they trust work completed without AI while 28% say they trust AI-assisted work. Virtually no workers indicate greater trust in work produced solely by AI.

FIGURE 11

Gen Z Workers' Trust of Artificial Intelligence at Work

Which would you trust more?



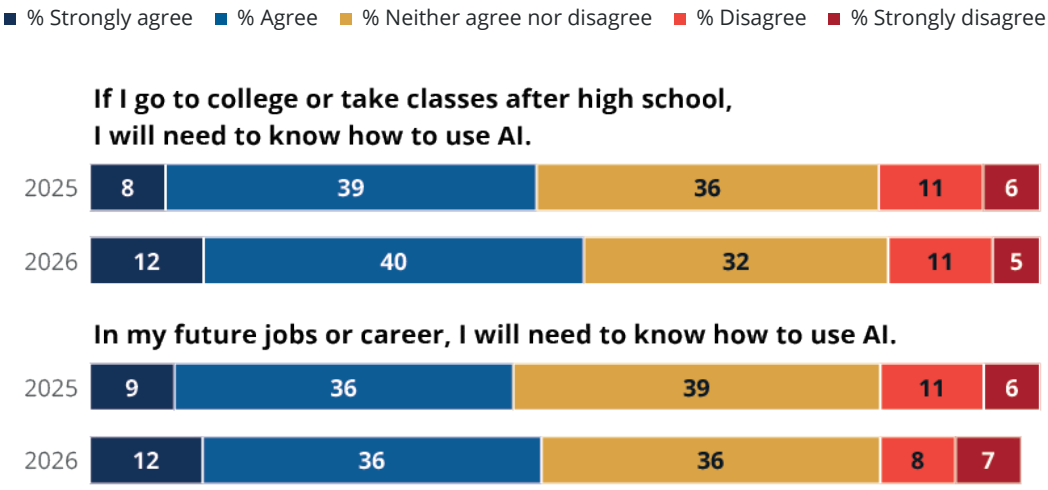
Note: Among employed Gen Zers

Despite concerns about AI, Gen Z students recognize the importance of understanding how to use it

When looking ahead, Gen Z K-12 students have become more convinced that AI skills will be important for their postsecondary education, but they remain less certain about those skills' role in their future careers. Fifty-two percent of students (up from 47% in 2025) agree that they will need to know how to use AI if they go to college or take classes after high school. At the same time, 48% of students now think they will need to know how to use AI in their future jobs or career, similar to last year's 45%.

FIGURE 12

Gen Z K-12 Students' Projected Post-High School Artificial Intelligence Use

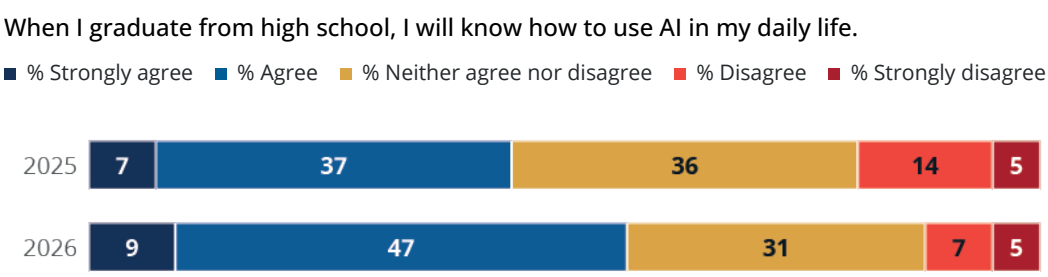


Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

Students' recognition of AI's importance is increasingly accompanied by a belief that they will be ready for it. A majority of students (56%) now agree or strongly agree that they will have the skills needed to use AI in their daily lives after graduation from high school, up 12 points since last year.

FIGURE 13

Gen Z K-12 Students' Expectations About Artificial Intelligence Knowledge Post-High School



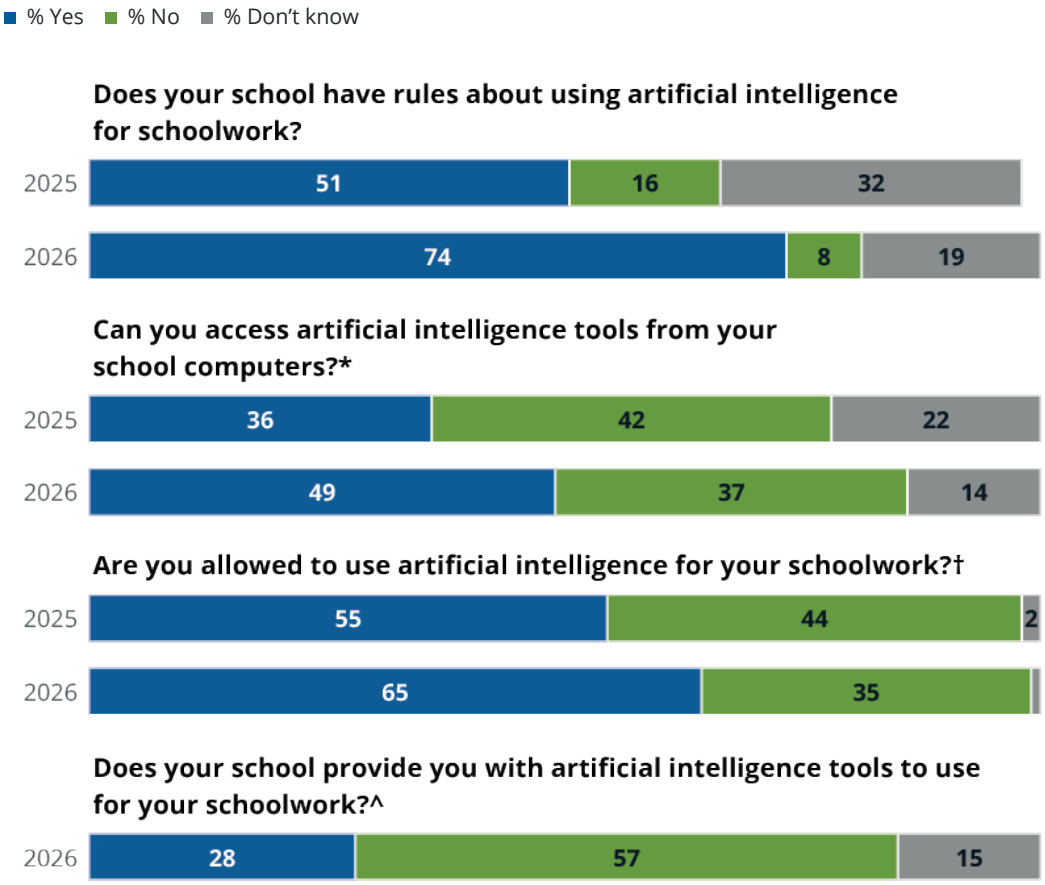
Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

This growing confidence may be due, in part, to changes happening at schools. The share of K-12 students who report that their school has AI rules jumped from 51% in 2025 to 74% in 2026. In addition, access to AI tools from school computers rose from 36% to 49% over the same period. Among students who say their school has a policy, 65% are now permitted to use AI for schoolwork, up from 55% in 2025.

Still, only 28% of students say that their school provides them with AI tools to use for their schoolwork.

FIGURE 14

Gen Z K-12 Students' Reports of Artificial Intelligence Policy and Access



Note: Response percentages may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

Data labels less than 2% are not displayed.

* "No" includes students who do not have a school computer.

† Among students whose school has an AI policy; "Yes" includes students who say their ability to use AI depends on the assignment or teacher.

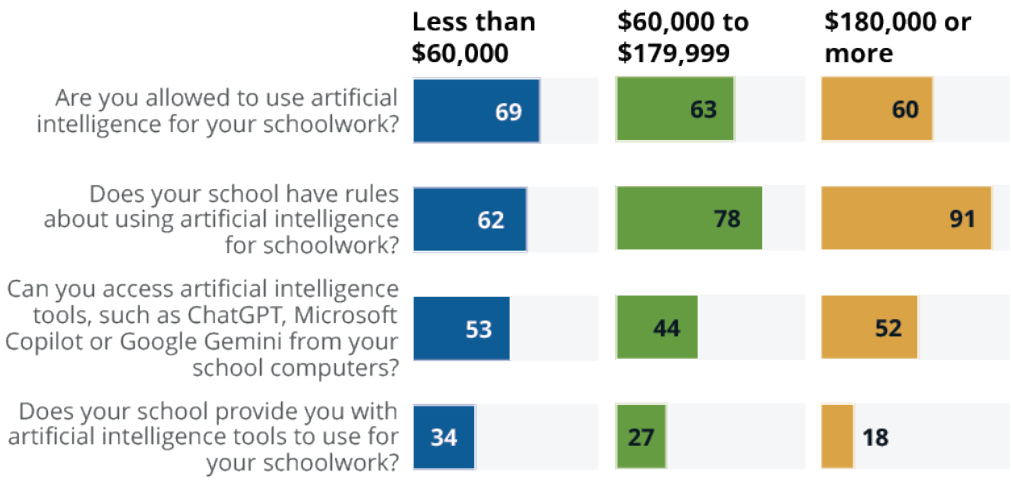
^ Question was not asked in 2025.

Students' reports of access to and use of AI in their schools vary based on their household's annual income. Students in lower-income households are more likely than those in middle- and upper-income households to say they are allowed to use AI for their schoolwork and that their school provides them with AI tools. Lower-income students, however, are least likely to say their school has rules about the use of AI, and middle-income students are least likely to say they can access AI tools from their school computers.

FIGURE 15

Gen Z K-12 Students' Reports of Artificial Intelligence School Policies and Access by Annual Household Income

% Yes



Students are engaging with parents about AI, particularly on its risks and rules

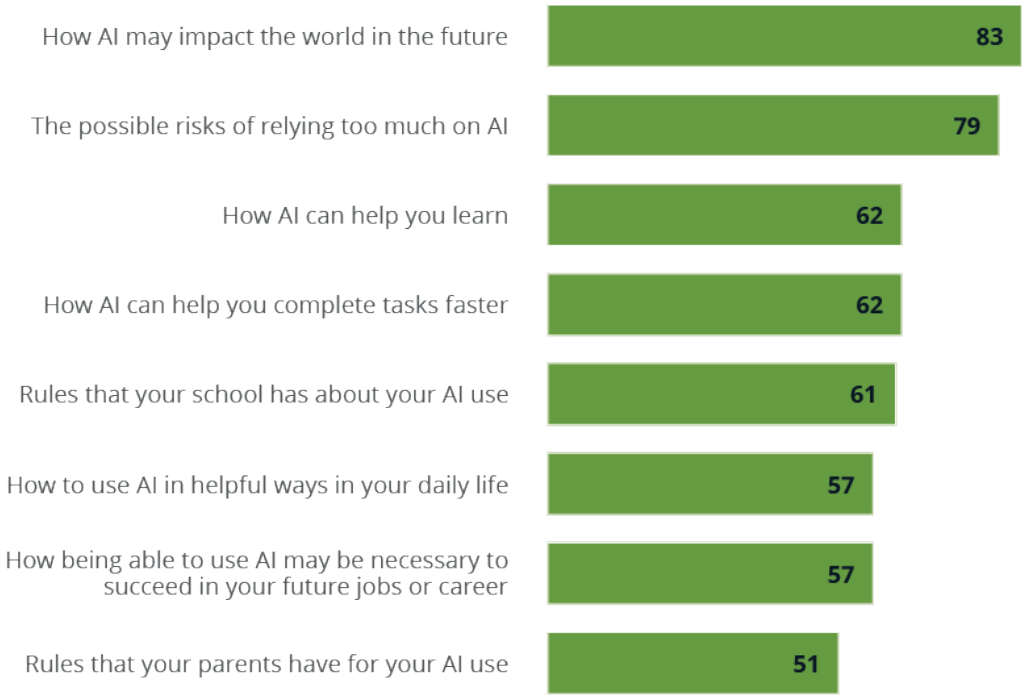
Nearly six in 10 Gen Z K-12 students (59%) say they have had a conversation with their parents about AI. These discussions cover a wide variety of subjects but are focused most on how AI may impact the world in the future (83%) and the possible risks of overreliance on it (79%). Fewer, though still solid majorities of 62% each, say they discussed practical applications such as learning or completing tasks more efficiently, and 61% say they addressed school rules. Fewer than six in 10 report talking about how to use AI in everyday life (57%), its importance for future careers (57%) and the rules at home for its use (51%).

FIGURE 16

Gen Z K-12 Students' Conversations With Parents About Artificial Intelligence

When you talked to your parents about AI, did you talk to them about the following?

% Yes



Note: Among the 59% of Gen Z K-12 students who have ever talked to their parents about AI

Implications

Gen Z's relationship with AI is stabilizing but not deepening as adoption is plateauing, enthusiasm is declining and skepticism is rising. The data paint a picture of a generation that is neither wholly rejecting AI nor fully embracing it — including those who use it every day. This signals a growing credibility challenge that access alone will not solve.

The strongest predictor of positive sentiment toward AI is frequency of use. That is, daily users report curiosity, excitement and hopefulness in dramatically higher proportions than non-users. Yet negative sentiment is rising even among frequent users, suggesting that simply making tools available is not enough. Employers and educators should prioritize structured, purposeful AI engagement that builds genuine competence and confidence, rather than assuming exposure alone will drive adoption.

Gen Z is increasingly questioning AI's benefits, particularly in areas tied to thinking, learning and creativity. Concerns that AI may undermine skill development appear to be outweighing its perceived efficiency gains. Trust will depend on demonstrating how AI can enhance rather than replace core cognitive abilities. Organizations that frame AI solely as a productivity tool risk deepening skepticism among a generation that is already aware of the tradeoffs involved.

In the workplace, Gen Z workers are more than three times as likely to say AI's risks outweigh its benefits, and trust in AI-assisted work is far lower than it is for work produced by humans. As organizations accelerate AI adoption, they may exacerbate a trust deficit that could undermine both productivity and retention. Transparent communication about how AI is being used and how human judgment remains central to work outcomes will be essential for bringing Gen Z workers along.

In the education space, schools are creating conditions for progress, but gaps remain. The rapid expansion of AI policies and access in K-12 settings is an encouraging development, but more than one-third of students still cannot access AI tools from school computers. Educators should consider not just whether students have access to AI, but whether that access is structured in ways that build, rather than replace, core skills.

Employers, educators and policymakers who invest in building trust, addressing legitimate concerns and creating environments where Gen Z can develop genuine AI competence have a meaningful opportunity to shape that trajectory for the better.

Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted Feb. 24-March 4, 2026, with a sample of 1,572 14- to 29-year-olds living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones.

Within the overall sample, 695 14- to 18-year-old children were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child 18 or younger living in their household. The remaining 877 18- to 29-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the sample of 695 parents of Gen Z children, the margin of sampling error is ±4.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the total sample of 1,572 Gen Z respondents, the margin of sampling error is ±3.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 656 Gen Z respondents still enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ±5.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 916 Gen Z youth who are no longer enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ±4.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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