

THE DEATH OF THE ENTRY-LEVEL JOB: FROM PYRAMID TO **DIAMOND**

AI is quietly reshaping the corporate ladder.

This lesson explores why graduate jobs are disappearing, whether middle management is next, and what it all means for anyone starting a career today.

C1
BUSINESS
English
Reading



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

12 key B2 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



ROLE-PLAY

decide together as a team



ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson looks at how AI is reshaping the traditional corporate hierarchy. You will read an article exploring why entry-level jobs are disappearing, whether middle management could be next, and what shape — a diamond, a tower, or something else — the company of the future might take.



BY THE END OF THIS LESSON, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Use 12 new business phrases and collocations confidently
- ✓ Discuss how AI is reshaping hiring and corporate structure
- ✓ Debate a real business decision from different points of view

WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

How has your job changed since the introduction of AI? Has it got easier?

To what extent has your productivity increased since the introduction of AI?

To what extent do you believe that entry-level jobs have changed over the past 2 years?

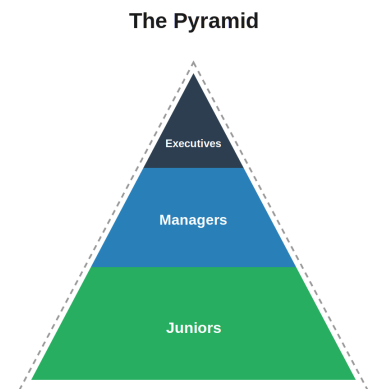
What career path would you choose if you were graduating today?

The Death of the Entry-Level Job: From Pyramid to Diamond

For generations, the path into a career followed a reassuringly simple logic: study hard, get a degree, land an entry-level job, and work your way up. Companies had to compete **to draw** the best fresh graduates, and if you were willing to carry out some pretty repetitive tasks to begin with, there was often a place for you at the bottom. However, it appears as if something is changing rather dramatically.

THE PYRAMID THAT BUILT THE MIDDLE CLASS

For most of the 20th century, companies were organised in a pyramid structure with a small number executives at the top, a broader level of managers in the middle, and a wide base of juniors at the bottom. These entry-level employees entered data into spreadsheets, scheduled meetings, proofread reports and kept the operation running. It was unglamorous work, but it was essential. For the young professionals, they learned how businesses functioned, and they picked up valuable new skills along the way.



ENTER AI — AND THE DISAPPEARING BASE

Unless you've been living under a rock, you'll know AI now drafts the emails, writes up the documents and crunches the data that used to land on a junior's desk. Which raises an uncomfortable question: what exactly is a graduate for and are they dispensable? In the US, graduates are now more likely to be unemployed than the workforce as a whole. Of those lucky enough to find employment, nearly 43% work in roles that never required a degree in the first place. Startups now only bring in graduates to fill 6% of roles, and even people with over 7 years' experience now fill up entry level roles once reserved for those straight out of university.

THE DISAPPEARING MIDDLE

With graduates slowly **squeezed out**, it seems **inevitable** that the pyramid is becoming a thing of the past. But what is happening to the managers in the middle? Managerial roles fell by over 6% between 2022 and 2025, and management now **accounts for** nearly a third of all layoffs, up from a fifth just a few years ago.

That might suggest middle management is heading the same way as the entry-level, but the picture is less clear than the stats suggest. AI may generate options brilliantly, but often only within the framework that the human offers it. **Left-field** suggestions are often lacking, as AI still remains relatively keen to **go along with** whatever the human suggests. It also struggles to make the kind of **judgment calls** that actually run a business. So for now at least it seems as if human oversight is still **indispensable**, but no-one really knows for how long.

If AI still proceeds only in whichever direction it is **nudged**, we will continue to require human judgment on AI decisions, meaning we may see something like a diamond: a thick section of middle managers, each running a very small, AI-augmented team of juniors. There may already be evidence for this, as one survey found over a third of employers had already rehired more than half the roles they had eliminated, most within six months.

But if the layoffs in middle management keep going, and AI keeps closing that judgment gap, the diamond may turn into something closer to a tower, with executives, managers and juniors all compressed to a similar size. The technology is too new, and moving too fast, to say which one wins out. But for the graduate stuck at the bottom of **the pecking order**, the outlook is much the same: much fewer opportunities for entry.

THE DILEMMA FOR BUSINESSES

With everything we have covered, not hiring graduates is now seen as rational behaviour for many businesses. Training a junior employee is expensive because companies must spend money to train them before they see any ROI — and there is no guarantee that person won't leave after they are trained. So it now makes much more sense to hope that a competitor will take on a new graduate and invest in training them while you use AI to carry out all the entry level tasks. When you then need an experienced middle-manager, you can always take ready-trained talent from your competitors.

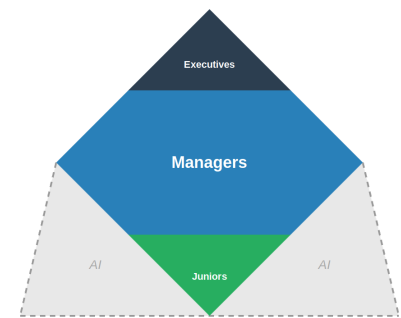
Of course, if nobody wants to take on the **burden** of training a junior, who will only work slower than AI anyway, then there will eventually be no experienced middle managers left to hire. This could potentially lead to a decrease in productivity **as opposed to** the increase that we have been promised with AI.

REASONS FOR CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

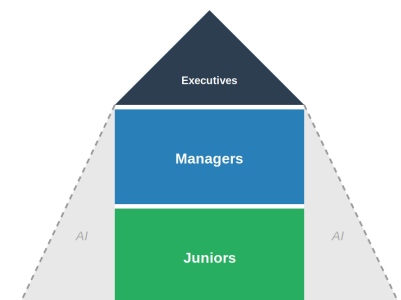
None of this is **inevitable**, and the picture is not entirely gloomy. The AI tools **squeezing** graduates **out** of entry-level jobs are also making it easier and cheaper to start something of their own. AI tools that would have required a team to operate five years ago are now accessible to a single motivated person, and the skills acquired could look very attractive to potential employers looking for middle managers.

Instead of starting at the bottom, new graduates may need to embrace a more entrepreneurial mindset, start on their own, and then find a way in further up **the pecking order** as a middle manager.

The Diamond (with AI filling the base)



The Tower (with AI filling the sides)



 KEY WORDS & PHRASES

to go along with

to draw

to squeeze out

inevitable

to account for

left-field

burden

a judgment call

indispensable

to nudge

the pecking order

as opposed to

1 BASED ON THE CONTEXT OF THE ARTICLE

Can you match the words in the box to the definitions listed below? Then add the word into the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word to fit the meaning of the sentence.

- To agree with someone, or accept an idea or plan without objecting: _____
 "I really like John's suggestion, so I'm happy to _____ it if everyone else is."
- Absolutely essential; impossible to do without: _____
 "Even with the new dashboard, human sign-off remains _____ before any invoice over \$10,000 goes out."
- A person's rank or position relative to others within an organisation: _____
 "Once the restructuring is finalised, everyone will know exactly where they stand in _____."
- To attract someone, especially by offering something appealing: _____
 "We need a stronger graduate scheme if we want to _____ the best candidates away from our competitors."
- A duty or responsibility that causes worry or extra work: _____
 "Nobody wants to take on the extra _____ of onboarding a new hire before the year-end deadline."
- Gently prompted or guided in a particular direction, rather than told directly: _____
 "The model only reached that conclusion because it was _____ toward it by the prompt we gave it."
- In contrast to; instead of: _____
 "We're looking for steady quarterly growth _____ one big spike followed by a slump."
- Unconventional or unexpected; outside the usual range of options: _____
 "I know it sounds a bit _____, but has anyone considered dropping the feature entirely rather than fixing it?"
- A difficult decision that requires experience and good sense rather than a fixed formula: _____
 "Pricing exceptions like this one are always going to come down to a _____ from someone senior."
- To make up a certain proportion or share of a total: _____
 "Returns now _____ nearly a fifth of our total shipping costs."
- Gradually forced out of a market, role or opportunity, usually by outside pressure: _____
 "Smaller suppliers are being _____ of the tender process altogether."
- Certain to happen; impossible to avoid: _____
 "Given how the market's moving, a round of layoffs looks pretty much _____ at this point."

2 CAN YOU ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW ABOUT THE TEXT?

1. According to the text, what were entry-level employees traditionally responsible for in the “pyramid” structure, and what did they gain from doing this work?

2. What evidence does the article give that middle management, not just entry-level roles, might also be shrinking?

3. According to the article, why does AI’s “well-documented flaw” mean that human oversight might still be indispensable?

4. What does the article suggest graduates could do instead of starting at the bottom of a traditional company hierarchy?

3 FILL IN THE GAPS

Below you can find a dialogue between two colleagues. Can you fill in the gaps with the words and phrases from the box below? You may need to change the form of some of the verbs in order for them to fit into the sentence. Note: two of the words are used twice, each time with a related meaning.

indispensable

the pecking order ×2

to draw

inevitable

to nudge

to squeeze out ×2

Rethinking the Graduate Scheme

AMARA (HEAD OF TALENT):

It feels almost _____ that we'll need to rethink the graduate scheme this year. We used to easily _____ brilliant candidates straight out of university, but more of them are being _____ before they even reach interview stage, and I don't want us to lose that pipeline for good. Where exactly do we now sit in _____ when it comes to attracting graduate talent compared to our competitors?

DEV (COO):

I hear you, but let's not get _____ into a decision we haven't properly tested. If we bring graduates back in without a clear plan, junior hires could easily be _____ again the moment budgets tighten. I'd rather pilot it with one team first, make sure a senior reviewer stays _____ to every decision they make, and reassess where the scheme sits in _____ once we've seen the results.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you think AI's tendency to be “too eager to please” is a temporary limitation, or could it always be a barrier to fully automating judgment-based roles? Why?

If you were a new graduate today, would you rather compete for one of the shrinking entry-level jobs, or try to build something of your own? What would influence your decision?

THE SCENARIO

A mid-sized consultancy is deciding whether to keep investing in its graduate training programme, or scale it back and rely on AI plus hiring experienced staff away from competitors instead.

6%

of roles at competitor startups now go to graduates, down from around 30%

34%

productivity boost AI gives a junior employee, according to one study

€180k

estimated cost of training one graduate to full productivity over 3 years

55%

of employers who cut junior roles citing AI already regret the decision

In groups of three or four, take on one of the roles below. Using these figures — and today's key phrases — discuss the benefits and risks of scaling back graduate training from your character's point of view, then work together to reach a group decision.

THE HEAD OF TALENT

- Believes graduates are being squeezed out across the industry, and that stopping training now would be short-sighted.
- Argues that without a pipeline, the firm will have no way to draw future managers from within.
- Worried the firm risks being left with nobody experienced enough to make the judgment calls senior roles require.

THE CFO

- Points out that €180k per graduate is a large, inevitable cost with no guarantee of return.
- Argues AI already gives junior-level productivity gains for a fraction of the price.
- Suggests it makes more sense to poach ready-trained managers later, as opposed to training them from scratch.

THE DELIVERY LEAD

- Worried that client relationships depend on having a stable, well-trained team, not just AI tools and last-minute hires.
- Believes junior staff currently do far more than AI can be nudged into handling reliably.
- Wants to know exactly where quality assurance sits in the pecking order if training is cut.

THE EXTERNAL CONSULTANT

- Is not emotionally attached to either option and can assess the decision from an outside perspective.
- Points out that if every firm relies on poaching instead of training, there will eventually be no one left to poach.
- Suggests a middle ground: a smaller graduate scheme, indispensable for succession planning, run alongside AI tools rather than replaced by them.

USEFUL PHRASES

GIVING YOUR OPINION

"From my perspective, the numbers speak for themselves."

"As far as I'm concerned, cutting this now would be a mistake."

AGREEING

"I agree — we should reach a consensus before moving forward."

"Yes, I think that would help us avoid unnecessary risk."

DISAGREEING

"I'm afraid I can't go along with you there."

"I don't think we should scrap the whole scheme all at once."

PERSUADING

"We need to think about who fills this role in ten years, as opposed to just next quarter."

"If we don't act now, we risk being squeezed out of the graduate market entirely."

REACHING A DECISION

"On the other hand, a smaller pilot scheme might be the safer move."

"On balance, I'd say it's time to..."

Group task: Once everyone has made their case, decide together — does the firm keep training graduates, scale the scheme back, or cut it entirely? Be ready to present your decision and reasoning to the rest of the class.