

White Paper

How AI Agents Are Redefining the Future of Work: Early Adopters Gain Significant Competitive Advantages

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Literature and entertainment are full of artificial beings that provide some type of automation or human mimicry. AI agents performing some of our tasks was recently just science fiction. Today, agents are working their way into our homes and workplaces to significantly impact and literally reinvent how we work — and what is possible. Today, companies must develop and refine a strategy for this emerging digital workforce that is gradually shaping which products and services will lead businesses into the next economy.

According to IDC, AI agents are autonomous, large language model (LLM)-powered software entities that can perceive their environment, make decisions, act upon them, and interact with users or other systems in a humanlike manner. These agents are different from traditional AI systems because they can make autonomous decisions and carry out complex tasks either with or without the need for constant human intervention.

AI agents will ultimately disrupt the way work was done in the past. They are a new piece of enterprise infrastructure that will alter every business function over time.

We are rapidly leaving the industrial revolution era, where the output of machines that replaceable humans ran determined the maximum possible corporate value. Most of our metrics are tied to these factory-centric metrics. What would happen if the emerging economy relied more on creativity, critical thinking, and innovation, not just output? IDC research shows that these traits are increasingly more important in a world where AI and agents are augmenting people in the workplace.

Businesses are realizing the benefits of being early movers in the AI space. Although a conservative approach to new technologies has often been rewarded, IDC research

suggests that the AI and agentic revolutions, which are fundamentally changing how we work and impacting both economies and expectations, are benefiting early adopters, many of which are creating a distinct market advantage that will make it harder for competitors to catch up.

IDC OPINION

We are riding a technological wave that is forcing us to choose between clinging, often unknowingly, to the industrial era's old ways or shifting to the emerging intelligent era. The impact will be just as significant as the emergence of the internet but happen at a much faster rate.

Most of Generation Alpha will never know a workplace or a university without AI. In his 1970 book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler made it clear that the future will require us to "learn, unlearn, and relearn" not just as a skill but as a fundamental ability to navigate an emerging economy and avoid the "future shock" of being overwhelmed by it.

It is now time to embrace this change and adapt to what Toffler foretold. The good news is that you will be able to do things that will amaze you almost every day. Your creativity will help you do more, do things in new ways, and perhaps even help you identify new revenue streams.

Uncertain Times, But Certainty of AI and Collaboration

Although economic or geopolitical concerns influence spending plans, IDC data shows that core spending will continue despite these concerns or even downturns; 51% of global companies said that they will increase their IT spending to achieve their objectives.

Security, risk, and compliance top the spending list (54% of global companies), with AI investments (48%) and workplace solutions, such as collaboration applications (35%), closely following. Global companies consider these investments to be "beyond budget cuts" because of their returns to the business returns (source: IDC's *Future Enterprise Resiliency and Spending Survey, Wave 2*, March 2025).

Companies that fail to invest will have a distinct disadvantage moving forward.

Rethinking Business

The old, reliable "sales funnel" first emerged around 1898 as a visual metaphor of the sales flow. It had a great run, but today, it fundamentally ignores the influence of "voices" on the internet sharing user experiences and watching how companies position themselves across paid, earned, shared, and owned online channels. The

funnel reflects what was available to measure in 1898, and today's world is, to say the least, different on many levels.

Although relationships in sales were key, corporate value was based on the throughput from machines that replaceable people operated. Today's value chain generally reflects a connected world, with connected businesses and hyperconnected customers. It also reflects a time where people have a greater impact on value, including in the development of products and services.

We can now identify new touch points in the buyer's journey, including buyers' level of engagement, advocacy (or detraction), and influence on others and their interest in an expanded portfolio. The way we can respectfully build relationships is evolving.

Much is made of how an interaction makes us feel. It is the quality of an experience that attracts and retains customers. The same is true for employees: A good employee experience makes it easier to hire and retain workers. The general availability of AI, agents, and multimodal technology has reset the expectations inside of work as well as outside the workplace.

The culture in a company now needs to embrace the opportunity to leverage the creativity of its workforce and enable agentic AI to empower greater personal, team, and organizational results. Existing experts can be empowered to see the new possibilities when augmented with agents in the workflow.

Evolving Within the Company

There is a strong connection between worker experience and customer experience. When expectations are met or exceeded, amazing things can and often do happen. The "act your wage" mentality is not helpful in today's workplace. Instead, it is necessary to encourage AI-enhanced collaboration and boost the value of individual creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration in the enterprise to drive both trust and the employee experience.

Over 75% of businesses find it easier to hire and retain talent with a well-integrated collaboration stack of applications. When businesses can incorporate their communications and collaboration into the flow of work, returns become significant. IDC research demonstrates that in these cases, companies see a return of 33 hours per person per week (see *IDC's Annual Collaboration Survey 2024: Measuring the Collaborative Evolution — North America and Western Europe*, IDC #US51376624, August 2024).

Overall impact comes from a new way of thinking: Each worker is connected and has access to the collaborative stack of applications, including integrated applications that help them do their job. Integrated connectivity with collaboration applications creates not only a wealth of data points but also a path for expedited work. Early adopters of

integrated collaboration are developing new, relevant metrics for their evolving business. These new metrics augment existing key performance indicators (KPIs) to provide new insights into work at every level and the business as a whole.

Perhaps most importantly, a connected, collaborative workforce creates data points that inform AI with better content, context, and relevancy — in short, better results.

THE RISE OF AGENTS: DO NOT MISS IT

Agents are on the verge of becoming your new teammates and personal automation services.

We already know that generative AI helps us ideate, brainstorm, and summarizes content. Agents are a different kind of AI. IDC defines AI agents as "autonomous software entities powered by LLMs ... capable of perceiving their environment, making decisions, acting upon them, and interacting with users or other systems [with or without human intervention]."

Agents Automate Work Across Systems

Agents need to be kept relevant and current. This is where human collaboration systems and agentic abilities become significantly better together. When applications — including those that each worker needs to complete their work — integrate with this collaboration stack, agents, AI, and people remain in the flow of work. This grounds AI in current content and relevant context. For the worker, there is no context switching, app flipping, or searching aimlessly for the right answer. Everything we have spent billions of dollars on to try and do for the past few decades is about to become much easier with agents tied to human collaboration.

What Else Is Possible?

Refining Collaboration in the Agentic Era: Beyond Productivity

Collaboration is what people do together to reach common goals. It is a human activity. The right technologies help people scale their impact. Previously, people used software to aid collaboration. Now, that collaboration is augmented with agentic workflows and agentic team members. That means every company and leader needs to be looking at collaboration as a strategic priority.

Despite appearances, people do not communicate using text alone. Outside work, they use audio, images, and video, with new formats to come. At work, documents, presentations, spreadsheets, and new, more free-form documents are entering the mix.

Collaborating on a document has purpose, but collaborating with asynchronous video across different platforms, including the CRM, HRIS, and marketing technology and development stacks, takes on a whole new meaning when AI and agents are part of the new collaborative environment.

Organizations can reinvent how work is done to improve customer outcomes.

Agent orchestration and optimization with the ability to control permissions, governance, compliance, and privacy layers will yield the best manageability for this new technology. This orchestration will be core to management and corporate adoption and ensuring agents continue to expand their capabilities. Agents will continue to expand both with the workflow and across different modalities to help drive new ways of working, perhaps even beyond the traditional productivity discussions.

What the Future Looks Like

With repetitive and routine tasks being automated with AI agents, existing metrics will evolve to measuring output and, in time, customer outcomes. How do creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving improve customer outcomes? How can that knowledge apply to a proof of concept for a new revenue stream?

Companies can spend more time on the actual quality of output rather than the numerical output. Some are already using the integrated collaborative stack, developing innovation rate metrics.

Still, current KPIs will merge with these new metrics. We can expect to see AI adoption rates (and resulting metric splits between those using AI and those not using AI), human time saved, overall customer satisfaction, just-in-time learning effectiveness, and average time to handle, especially in customer-facing positions.

Be a First Mover

Many companies lost out when they failed to make the leap from a brick-and-mortar business to an online business and from telephones to email, social media, and communities. AI and agentic workforce adoption will take a few years, not decades, to make a significant impact on a company's ability to compete.

The benefits of being a first mover in an industry are real. Integrated applications, which combine everything with a human and agentic collaboration layer, quickly reveal advantages. A modern, competitive organization will benefit from corporate cultural acceptance, trust in the systems, and an integrated collaborative stack that ties it all together as literally a Work OS. Waiting to see what happens may have worked in the past but doing so now will be costly at many different levels.

IN THIS WHITE PAPER

AI, especially agentic AI, is helping profoundly disrupt businesses and how people, systems, and agents collaborate to create new value streams and improve old ones. However, it is the intrinsically human act of collaboration that helps make AI more effective and useful. This partnership recreates how work gets done — and how it will evolve.

This white paper discusses the emerging economy's drivers and provides a data-grounded understanding of how to leverage these new technologies — starting with rethinking collaboration and the new workflows employees can create to work faster and smarter, invent new efficiencies, and remain current in an intelligent new world that is redefining business in real time.

This white paper also looks at the urgency of AI, the new benefits it can provide, the improved outcomes first movers can achieve, and the pain that slow movers will experience.

Collaboration is the fuel that propels this transformation, allowing businesses to harness the full potential of AI, agents, and especially people. By integrating AI and agents into collaborative environments, companies can streamline operations, enhance customer outcomes, and foster a connected workforce. Together with application integrations, which inform AI with better content and context, AI generates a wealth of data points for more relevant and effective results.

In this fast-paced technological wave, embracing AI and collaboration is imperative. Companies that fail to invest in these areas risk falling behind, as the benefits of being a first mover are significant. The future of work lies in the seamless integration of AI, agents, and human collaboration, driving new ways of working and enhancing overall business value.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Enterprises find it challenging to manage the overall speed of change and uncertainty, including adopting AI. Generative AI benefits the workforce, but agents are changing how companies work and impacting actual workflows.

IDC research suggests that the AI and agentic revolutions are rewarding early adopters, many of which are creating a distinct market advantage that will make it harder for competitors to catch up.

Collaboration is key to informing AI. Superpowers do not come from AI alone but from integrating core applications, the company-specific artifacts of collaboration, and

systems into an intelligent collaborative stack that serves as an operating system for the new way of working.

The magic happens not by integrating AI but by using it to expand the way an organization secures its environment and maintains governance while creating new ways of working and generating revenue. Agents can be specialized team members, limited by permissions that can empower each member of the collaborative team to use their creativity and critical thinking skills to expand what is possible in the workplace.

Collaboration-enhanced intelligence is already becoming a differentiator for early adopter companies that recognize the world is rapidly changing and want to lead the shift from the industrial revolution to what comes next.

CHALLENGES/OPPORTUNITIES

Slack is well positioned to remain a leader in the market. It has engaged teams in channel-based conversations with an enterprise grade, yet consumerlike experience for over a decade. Slack users have embraced its collaborative features, powered with deep integrations into a large number of applications and platforms. Slack AI has helped change search execution and represents a significant upgrade to traditional search.

Slack's pairing with Agentforce incorporates agents to reinvent workflows and orchestrates agents within both Slack and all the integrated applications to create a powerful new collaborative application stack. This approach is highly effective at grounding AI, including agents in recency and context, with relevant communications, collaboration, and workflows.

Slack was designed for conversational automation from its earliest days, enabling automation across integrated applications using bots. Now, conversational AI agents are a natural extension of the product's original architecture.

Slack's biggest challenge is to stand out in a field where there are deeply entrenched solutions. Slack, however, is different from the other solutions as Slack enables collaboration, and now agents, in the flow of work without the need for application switching. This itself creates benefits in time savings and effectiveness through better focus. IDC research reveals that the company has real fans whose careers are accelerating because of the new ways its integrated, intelligent collaboration is helping their business — regardless of solutions in use (see *IDC MarketScape: Worldwide Team Collaboration Applications 2024 Vendor Assessment*, IDC #US51405624, November 2024).

CONCLUSION

Everything we have spent billions of dollars on to try and do for the past few decades is about to become much easier with agents tied to human collaboration.

We are riding a technological wave that requires us to choose between embracing the emerging intelligent era or cling instead to outdated industrial methods. This shift is just as monumental as the internet's advent but is happening significantly faster. There is a greater need, as Alvin Toffler stated, to "learn, unlearn, and relearn" as a fundamental skill to navigate the future economy.

Collaboration is evolving as a grounding force — and an effective interface to get the most out of AI at every level of an enterprise — or even a small business.

AI agents are emerging as new teammates and automation services. Each worker, when armed with a set of agents, has the ability to become exponentially more efficient. Agents automate work across systems, and pairing them with human collaboration makes them significantly more effective. They can change how a business works and influence what it can achieve.

Collaboration is a human activity, and the right technologies help scale impact. People communicate using various formats, and collaborating with asynchronous video across platforms takes on a new meaning with AI and agents. Orchestrating agents with permissions, governance, compliance, and privacy layers will be crucial for adoption and growth.

Being a first mover is imperative. The world is changing rapidly, and integrated applications with human and agentic collaboration layers offer immediate benefits. Waiting is not an option.

MESSAGE FROM THE SPONSOR

Slack is the work operating system that brings your people, apps, processes, data and now AI agents together to propel your organization forward. Millions of people work in Slack every day with global teams, partners and customers, sending over 5.2B messages and launching over 28 million workflows weekly. Over 2600 popular enterprise apps are ready to add in the Slack Marketplace, allowing teams to use their favorite tools and stay focused in the flow of work. As part of Salesforce, Slack is where Agentforce, an always-on digital workforce, works alongside your teams and amplifies the impact of sales, service, HR, IT and more. Slack was named a leader in the IDC MarketScape: Worldwide Team Collaboration Applications 2024 Vendor Assessment. To learn more about how companies of all sizes transform how they work with Slack, visit slack.com.

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