(404) Job Not Found:

What Workforce Training Can't Fix for Black Atlantans in the Age of AI

Anuli Akanegbu, PhD

DATA&
SOCIETY

Contents

Executive Summary

As AI becomes a defining feature of the US labor market, AI literacy is being positioned as a new baseline for employability. Despite the widespread use of the term across workforce and policy agendas, AI literacy lacks a clear definition and a consistent application. This intentional vagueness, or what this report refers to as *strategic abstraction*, has created a moving target for career advancement that workers are expected to hit with little guidance and no guarantees.

Given the rapid pace of technological advancement, what we call literacy in the context of AI adoption arguably functions as both a gatekeeping mechanism and a key site of labor stratification. Instead of treating AI literacy as a neutral and static skillset, *(404) Job Not Found* applies an equity lens to analyze it as a social and political construct manufactured by the power of employer expectations, media narratives, place branding[1], philanthropic investments, and political agendas.

Based on months-long ethnographic fieldwork in Atlanta — a city shaped by a legacy of racial capitalism and a culture of Black self-determination — this report interrogates what it means to be perceived as AI literate in today's labor market, and how perceptions of skill are shaping the career outcomes of Black workers already navigating racial, spatial, occupational, and economic inequities. The findings presented in this report are situated within a broader critique of digital transformation agendas, illustrating through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and histo-cultural analysis how efforts to upskill and reskill workers often place the burden of adaptability squarely on the shoulders of individuals trying to get a foot in the door while obscuring the structural forces that restrict access to stable, high-quality employment[2] in the first place.

(404) Job Not Found ultimately calls for a complete reimagining of workforce development in the age of AI that shifts from worker-first rhetoric to worker-*centered* practices. Critically, this report urges academics, policymakers, and practitioners to expand the spatial scope of public discourse on AI and labor to include the US South — not just as a labor pool, but as a region with histories and cities that are essential to understanding and transforming the future of work.

Introduction

Access Denied: Connecting Talent to Opportunity in the Age of AI

"There is a big emphasis on our developers to learn AI as quickly as possible," said an Atlanta-based engineer manager. "We are rolling out a lot of different trainings, and people that we hire, if they don't learn AI, or at least show interest in it, they'll probably be replaced just because what AI can do now is so much faster."

But herein lies the problem: Only half of workers globally have access to adequate AI training opportunities.[3] On top of that, National Skills Coalition (NSC), a nonprofit that advocates for inclusive skills training, found that approximately one-third of workers in the US lack even basic digital skills such as the ability to use a computer mouse or highlight text on screen and that workers of color are disproportionately affected due to histories of exclusion from digital infrastructure and education.[4]

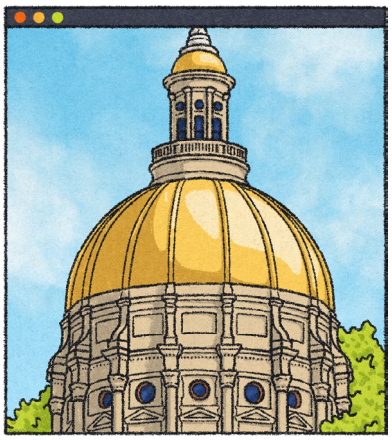
The access doctrine, as social scientist Daniel Greene explains, emerged in the 1990s during the Clinton administration's push to commercialize the internet and confront what it called the digital divide.[5] Greene argues that efforts to close the digital divide must be understood not only as technology policy, but as poverty policy that is aligned with broader reforms to unemployment insurance, job training, and even criminal justice. He additionally asserts that the underlying logic of the access doctrine, which maintains that workers can secure stable, well-paid jobs with enough digital tools and skills, follows a predictable sequence of first declaring a crisis of national competitiveness, then defining that crisis in human-capital terms, and finally proposing solutions

rooted in deregulated telecommunications markets and targeted public-private partnerships. Sound familiar?

Power brokers around the world such as city boosters, employers, philanthropists, and policymakers have largely responded to the mismatch between employer expectations and worker capacity in times of digital transformation with calls to reskill and upskill workers. "Reskilling" refers to training workers to perform an entirely new job or occupation, while "upskilling" involves enhancing a worker's existing skill set to keep pace with evolving job demands. While important, training alone is not guaranteed to connect talent to opportunity. In an analysis of reskilling and upskilling efforts in India, policy researcher Jai Vipra points out an important irony in state-mandated upskilling initiatives: "When a large number of people are 'upskilled' — enough to drive the cost of such skilled labor down in a segmented global labor market — those skills are no longer seen as valuable because they are so easily available, and therefore no longer 'above' other skills."[6] Vipra concludes that activities that are well-paid or higher in status are often assumed to require more skill, even if they don't. Conversely, work that is undervalued is often perceived as low-skill, even if it requires deep knowledge or effort.

Like the architecture of the modern web, the modern labor market is structured by algorithms, mediated by platforms, and driven by unequal investments in access.

The relationship between status, value, and access is reflected in how connectivity is structured and experienced in the digital age. Getting a job in today's labor market is like gaining access to the internet because it's not just about being online, it's about the quality of the connection between people and place. In both systems, data is exchanged and decisions are made based on an individual's status signals and location in the network. The stronger their signals of status regarding credentials, referrals, and institutional proximity, the more likely they are to be verified and connected to opportunity. The weaker their signals of status, the more likely they are to be misread or blocked entirely.



Cover artwork detail. Image by Elly Rodgers

Like the architecture of the modern web, the modern labor market is structured by algorithms, mediated by platforms, and driven by unequal investments in access. A secure and reliable connection to high-quality employment is rarely neutral because it reflects the power and privilege embedded in the network itself.

As AI is marketed to everyone as a skill, a tool, a product, and a solution for everything, lost between the hype and the backlash is the critical fact that the age of AI isn't creating new opportunities as much as it is reshuffling old ones along the familiar fault lines of race, class, gender, and geography.

This is the case in Atlanta.

Welcome to Atlanta

> This audience, I trust, will pardon me — I come from Macon. Atlanta did not get on well at one time with the middle and southern portion of the state. Her people were not like our people, the push and energy of her citizens, the rapid strides which they made in wealth and progress, gave her more the appearance of one of our western or northern cities than of a southern metropolis.
>
> – N.E. Harris (1888) [7]

There is a critical need to study the intersection of labor, race, and technology from cities in the US South which are often overlooked in national conversations dominated by coastal narratives. For starters, more than half of the country's Black population (56 percent) now live in the South. The state of Georgia alone boasts one of the largest labor forces in the country, with over 5.3 million workers. Its capital city, Atlanta, is listed among the top cities in the US for job seekers[8] and is home to the nation's second-largest Black metro population after New York City.[9] Atlanta has one of the highest concentrations of Black tech workers in the country at roughly 25 percent.[10] This proportion stands in stark contrast to top-billed tech hubs like San Jose and San Francisco where Black representation in tech falls below 7 percent. However, behind the screens in the pit of the Peach State[11] are complex socioeconomic entanglements that determine who is granted access to opportunity and whose access is denied.

System Error: Atlanta's Structural Gaps

"I feel like I've achieved the American Dream," said Andres Castro, a staff software engineer at Intuit Mailchimp turned 2026 candidate for Georgia's Fifth Congressional District — the seat once held by civil rights icon John Lewis. "That's how I literally feel, like that. And now I'm looking around and I'm like why can't other people feel like that? Why am *I* here? Why did *I* make it? And where are all the gaps in society that allow other people to fall through the cracks?"

Atlanta arguably functions as both a mirror of national labor dynamics and a microcosm of the structural inequities that define them, offering an important vantage point from which to examine how workforce development, racial equity, and technological change are colliding in real time. Atlanta is not just the capital of Georgia; it has been the nation's capital of income inequality for much of the past decade with white households holding 46 times more wealth than Black households.[12]

Atlanta is not just the capital of Georgia; it has been the nation's capital of income inequality for much of the past decade […]

The Economic Policy Institute explains that these inequities are the product of a Southern economic development model that continues to extract value from Black labor while shielding employers from redistributive demands.[13] This model — with roots in slavery and buds in contemporary labor policy — is characterized by low wages, low taxes, minimal labor protections, and a deep hostility to unions. Union density in Georgia is among the lowest in the US, with just 3.8 percent of wage and salary workers unionized in 2024, compared to nearly 10 percent nationwide.[14] As a right-to-work state, Georgia offers no comprehensive collective bargaining rights. These conditions define a policy landscape in which economic growth does not translate into shared prosperity. The scarcity of affordable housing and the unequal access to affordable, reliable internet connectivity only deepen these divides.

While developing a skilled workforce appears worker-centric on the surface, reskilling and upskilling initiatives often prioritize supplying industry with flexible, low-cost labor over sustaining workers with long-term security, livable wages, or collective bargaining power. In this pro-business environment, regulatory rollbacks are framed as economic opportunity, even as they risk eroding the very protections workers need most.

(404) Job Not Found excavates the space between high-minded techno-optimism and the lived realities of workers on the ground, to study the cultures of AI in metro Atlanta at a systems level, tracing how it is discussed in educational spaces, promoted by industry, implemented by government, and understood within civil society.

Who and What This Report Focuses On

Black workers are positioned both within and against dominant narratives of innovation with an expectation to embrace digital transformation without questioning who benefits most from it. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, histo-cultural analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted at various sites including digital skilling[15] programs, professional development workshops, and technology conferences across metro Atlanta, I investigate how Black workers in both technical roles (such as engineering, data analysis, and cybersecurity) and tech-adjacent roles (including marketing, sales, and customer support) are engaging with AI as a tool, a requirement, a threat, and an opportunity. I elevate the perspectives of these workers in particular because they are who I most frequently encountered during my fieldwork. In a few cases, research participants were also people I met in my personal life while engaged in everyday conversations where my response to the common icebreaker questions of "What do you do?" and "What are you working on?" often elicited some kind of curiosity about, connection to, or vested interest in my work. This relational, community-based approach to research recruitment is explained further in the "Methods" section in the appendix of this report.

Whether through formal training in schools, community-based programs, employer-led initiatives or through more informal exposure to labor market trends and public discourse in their everyday lives, the workers I encountered in Atlanta are being primed to participate in the rapid commercialization of AI. Yet, despite the pressure to adopt and apply AI tools to their work processes, they are offered little concrete evidence of its benefits beyond unverified proclamations of increased productivity and mandates that they must adopt by any means necessary in order to remain competitive enough to advance professionally.

The questions I present in this report are rooted in scholarly inquiry and personal curiosity: What does it mean to be perceived as "AI literate," and how are perceptions of skill shaping the career outcomes of Black workers? Who defines "literacy" when technologies evolve faster than our institutions? In this writing, I intentionally mirror — and simultaneously critique — terms like "AI literacy," because they are the dominant lexicon used by the institutions, programs, and stakeholders I studied. I mirror this language critically, cautiously, and in full awareness that language both shapes and obscures reality, especially in the hands of power.

Central to this report is the political economy of digital skilling — who designs it, who funds it, who markets it, who is expected to participate in it and *how*. I maintain that terms like AI literacy are less descriptors and more performances or linguistic code-switches for a cultural moment marked by a surge in political uncertainty[16] which has led to significant job insecurity[17] for workers across sectors and levels.

The bottom line is that in Atlanta, the intertwined yet often conflicting priorities of power brokers such as city boosters, employers, philanthropists, and policymakers across the public and private sectors profoundly shape both job creation (i.e., increasing the number of available jobs) and job access (i.e., ensuring people can actually obtain those jobs). In their efforts to position Atlanta as a forward-thinking, progressive city, these actors routinely play the role of strategic brand managers, mobilizing emotion to build trust and sell AI as the ultimate symbol of progress without addressing the systemic disparities that it exacerbates.

Where I'm Situated and Why It Matters

I am an Atlanta-based cultural anthropologist who works remotely for a nonprofit research institute with strong networks in the Northeast and West. This means that I often find myself bridging vastly different geographies of influence. While much of the national conversation about AI and labor is led by Silicon Valley tech firms or civic tech circles in Washington, DC, and New York City, the qualitative accounts detailed in this report are grounded in Atlanta where, from my observations, people are comparatively more techno-optimistic. After all, the cotton gin, a beacon of the first Industrial Revolution, was invented in Georgia.

Although I was born in Washington, DC, and have previously lived in New York City, I am currently embedded in Atlanta's network. Atlanta, to me, is not just a place I study; it's where I live, listen, and learn. Still, I've wrestled with how to write this report in a way that resonates across geographies and audiences, especially since it is situated in the South where histories of labor, race, and technology — such as the history of the cotton gin — carry a distinct sociopolitical weight.

All that said, this is where I've landed: As with previous waves of digital transformation in the United States the stakes of who advances and who is left behind have always fallen heaviest on Black Southern workers. Given this pattern, the lived experiences and insights of these workers demand a serious analysis that accounts for both historical exclusions and the contemporary narratives of innovation that so often overlook and undermine them.

How This Story Unfolds

The report begins by providing background context on the rising interest in AI and the growing pressure for workers to demonstrate AI literacy in an evolving labor market. The next section, *Area Codes and Error Messages* offers a systems-level look at Atlanta's AI ecosystem and provides an analysis of the city's place-branding efforts to leverage the popularity and power of AI in a mission to become known as a top tech hub. This is followed by *Is Talent Truly King in Atlanta's Age of AI? A Tale of Two Workers in One City*, which contrasts the lived experiences of two Black workers navigating Atlanta's AI economy from very different vantage points to reveal how opportunity in the city often hinges more on social location and network access than on skill. From there, the report explores the role of workforce intermediaries, such as nonprofits and social enterprises, in shaping how AI training is delivered, and what it means for workers navigating these programs. I then go on to highlight an example of an alternative model to the "train-then-hire" model that dominates workforce development in Atlanta with a subsection titled *From the Classroom to Client Work*. The report concludes with a section titled *Troubleshooting for More Equitable Digital Skilling* gleaned from my fieldwork, with recommendations for policymakers, employers, funders and philanthropic organizations, program designers and training providers, researchers, as well as local governments and economic development agencies. This is followed by my acknowledgments and an appendix that features (1) an ethnographic snapshot of a day spent at a workforce development hub tucked in Atlanta's westside, (2) a full overview of my methodology, (3) a references section, and (4) endnotes.

This report doesn't claim to have all the answers to the looming questions about AI adoption and implementation in the labor market, but it does strive to separate signal from noise to chronicle how AI is reshaping work in the United States and how Black workers in Atlanta are responding with skepticism and strategies of their own to make sense of yet another era of digital transformation that promises everything and guarantees nothing.

"Power Profit". Image courtesy of Clarote & AI4Media via Better Images of AI and Creative Commons 4.0

Background

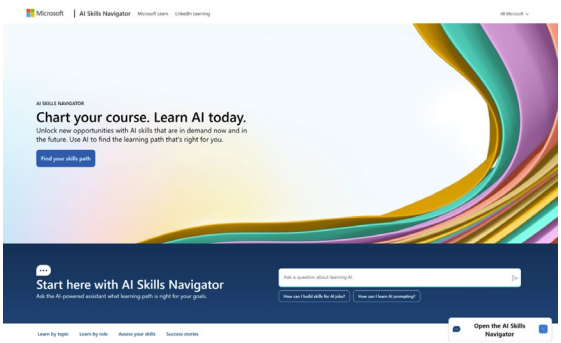
Hey Chat, It's Time for a Vibe Check: Querying the Demand for "AI Skills"

Employers across sectors are placing a premium on AI literacy and AI fluency, distinguishing them as core competencies rather than optional assets for job seekers. A global study released by the IBM Institute for Business Value found that CEOs expect their companies' AI investments to more than double over the next two years.[18] More than half (54 percent) of the CEOs surveyed also reported hiring for AI-related roles that didn't exist just a year ago.

In the United States, this shift is being driven, in large part, by federal government agendas that frame AI readiness as essential to national competitiveness, workforce development, and economic growth. Although the Trump administration's so-called worker-first AI agenda[19] prioritizes "AI literacy and skills development," the agenda does not actually define what AI literacy is or specify what core AI skills workers need to develop. As a result, the agenda's stated goals ranging from "Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth" (Executive Order 14277) to "Preparing Americans for High-Paying Skilled Trade Jobs of the Future" (Executive Order 14278) lack the foundational clarity needed to guide and ensure meaningful implementation.

This intentional vagueness reflects how abstraction, or more aptly strategic abstraction, operates as a tool of power, allowing policymakers to make large pronouncements about AI implementation while shifting the burden of interpretation onto individuals, especially those already navigating precarious labor conditions. Strategic abstraction creates real on-the-ground confusion for individuals by telling them to become AI literate without offering clarity on what that entails.

The lack of clarity around what constitutes an AI skill is not limited to public policy, it also shows up in corporate narratives. Microsoft's *AI Skills Navigator*, for instance, encourages users to "find their skills path" through an assessment that evaluates both digital and AI-related competencies. The tool breaks down skills into the following broad categories:



Screenshot of Skills Navigator website (2025)

1. Data fluency: Navigating information and data
2. Effective communication and collaboration
3. Content creation and management
4. Cybersecurity: Online security and ethics
5. Personal well-being, sustainability, and environmental impact
6. Creative problem-solving with technology and AI
7. Continuous learning

After completing the assessment, respondents are assigned a ranking from Level 1 to Level 5. A Level 1 score indicates a beginner, Level 3 denotes proficiency, and Levels 4 and 5 suggest expertise that is primarily defined by the ability to use Microsoft's AI tools effectively and guide others in doing the same. While framed as empowering, the Navigator conflates product familiarity with technological fluency, further blurring the line between education, employability, and corporate branding.

In my ethnographic encounters, several workers expressed confusion about whether AI literacy meant learning how to code, use a chatbot, manage data, or simply include the right keywords on a résumé. I observed how some spoke the corporatized language of innovation without a clear understanding of what fluency actually required, highlighting how corporate framings of AI skills create more confusion than clarity.

Although the terms "AI literacy" and "AI fluency" tend to be used interchangeably in public discourse, conversations held with educators for this report revealed that in reference to AI, "literacy" is about knowing what AI is and what it does while "fluency" is about being able to use the technology in your work or life. However, I argue that there remains a lack of broad consensus on what it means to be AI literate or AI fluent which has created ambiguity in the labor market about what does and doesn't constitute as an AI skill, especially for nontechnical workers. Hannah Calhoon, vice president of AI at job search platform Indeed, put it plainly in a *Washington Post* interview: "There's not some universal standard for AI fluency, unfortunately."[20]

Solving this problem can start with a shift in public discourse from calls for AI literacy to a more grounded demand for AI education. But even this rhetorical shift does not change the fact that AI literacy as a social and political construct as well as a product of strategic abstraction is intentionally vague. This allows power brokers to gesture toward innovation and inclusion without committing to structural change or accountability.

Still, AI literacy is gaining traction. According to LinkedIn data, AI literacy is now the fastest growing skill users are adding to their profiles.[21] Recruitment professionals are leading this trend with a 129 percent growth rate in AI skills training through LinkedIn Learning — nearly double the rate of all users. This signals a rapidly growing interest in AI among the professionals tasked with shaping the workforce.

By examining how AI is framed across job descriptions, scholarly publications, media coverage, and public discourse, I've found that while technical AI skills typically refer to the engineering capabilities like machine learning that are needed to build, maintain, and deploy AI models, AI literacy seemingly encompasses a broader set of competencies. These include the ability to effectively use tools like ChatGPT and write "prompts," which are natural language instructions that generative AI models can interpret and respond to. This practice, now commonly referred to as "prompt engineering," has emerged as a key desired competency for nontechnical workers. Meanwhile, for technical workers, "vibe coding" has automated and aestheticized aspects of what was once the highly manual process of software development.

The terms "prompt engineering" and "vibe coding" arguably reshape public perception of these tasks. The term "prompt engineering" semantically elevates everyday digital interaction into the realm of specialized skill, repackaging familiar practices like searching, querying, and writing into something newly marketable. In contrast, the term "vibe coding" subtly reframes serious development work into something more stylized and less refined, risking trivializing the technical rigor and labor involved. Ironically, despite its informality, the vibe coder may still be perceived as more technically sophisticated than the ubiquitous prompt engineer even if vibe coding is arguably a kind of prompt engineering.

Taken together, these terms expose how language can distort the visibility and value of labor to reflect a broader ambiguity over what counts as an AI skill and for whom. As hype continues to

Image courtesy of Clarote & AI4Media via Better Images of AI and Creative Commons 4.0

outpace regulation and clarity around AI competencies, this linguistic inflation — where some skills are overdetermined while others are overlooked — complicates efforts to equitably train and employ a diverse workforce. In a labor market increasingly governed by perception, it is not only *what* you know that matters, but *how* those skills are framed, marketed, and recognized by institutions of power.

The "Brand Man" in the Age of AI

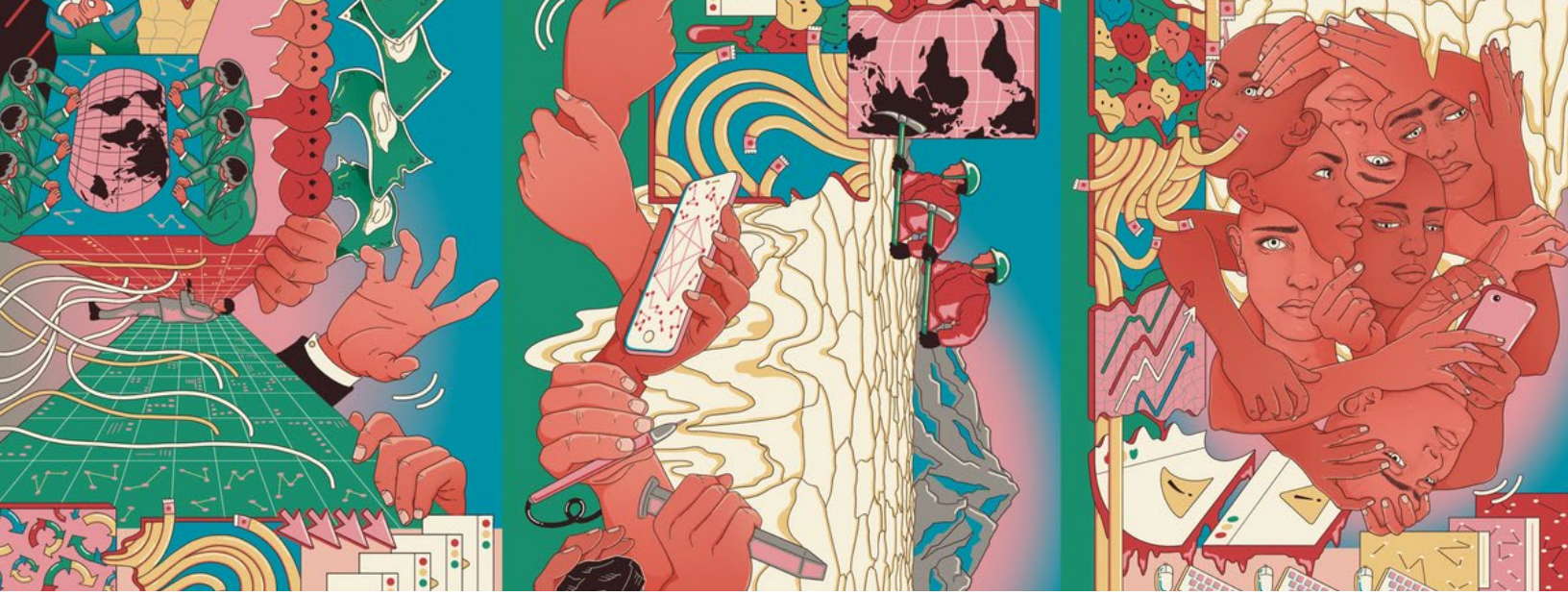
In a self-promotional flier posted on LinkedIn, one job-seeker marketed themself as "proficient in leveraging generative AI technology for increased efficiency in completing deliverables." While it may read as jargon, I don't fault them. When even those in power can't agree on what AI literacy means, what else can workers do but code-switch to advance bit-by-bit in the existing operating system?

Unlike nontechnical job descriptions which sometimes nod to possessing a "demonstrated interest in leveraging AI," job descriptions for roles such as AI researcher or AI engineer clearly articulate preferences such as a background in data science or computer science and a proficiency in coding languages such as Python. Python was by far the most frequently mentioned coding language I've seen listed in job descriptions online and taught in the digital skilling courses I observed in Atlanta. Likewise, a job description for the role of "chief artificial intelligence officer" with the US Department of Commerce sought candidates with qualifications that included, "3+ years of proven skills related to Emerging Technology, such as but not limited to Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Robotic Process Automation implementation of Natural Language Processing (NLP), Expect Systems Evolutionary Computation, Robotic Process Automation, & Deep Machine Learning/Neural Networks domain." Notably, the candidate who best sells their "proven skills" to get the job will earn an annual salary ranging from $150,160 to $207,500. It may seem peculiar that the role offers a six figure salary for a minimum three years of experience but less so when you remember that OpenAI launched ChatGPT in 2022.

Whether the job was as a program manager of artificial intelligence for the Georgia Technology Authority or as a vice president of artificial intelligence for UPS, I found that the most preferred background for AI-focused roles was in product management. In practice, this means that candidates are expected to lead cross-functional teams that oversee the process of developing, launching, and operating AI-powered products for their organizations.

The demand for workers with a product management background suggests that the age of AI — like the dot-com boom of the late 1990s and the rise of social media era in the early 2000s — has created conditions for technical workers to leverage their expertise and position themselves not just as builders of technology, but as marketers of it, too. Assuming the role of "Brand Man," akin to the kind of brand managers[22] first described in a 1931 memo by then-president of Procter & Gamble, Neil H. McElroy,[23] these individuals study markets, shape narratives, and turn ambiguity into business strategy to sell AI as a skill, a tool, a product, and a solution. But what's really being sold is data — your data, our data, and the data of entire cities. Whether or not we fully consented to the terms and conditions, in this operating system we are not just workers; we are bits for sale meant to be efficiently processed as productive and valued only as metrics.

Atlanta, as both a rising tech hub and a site of deep, historical inequality, offers a particularly sharp lens through which to examine the role of the brand man in the age of AI, because just as workers are being commodified under the guise of innovation, so, too, is the city itself.



"AI Mural". Image courtesy of Clarote & AI4Media via Better Images of AI and Creative Commons 4.0

Area Codes and Error Messages: Atlanta's AI Ecosystem

One of my first fieldwork experiences for this project took place during 404 Day, an unofficial local holiday that's grown into a full-blown cultural event across Atlanta. Named after Atlanta's iconic 404 area code, the day gestures to a shared sense of place and belonging. Held annually on the fourth day of April, 404 Day celebrates all things Atlanta with a growing schedule of community-focused tentpole events such as a celebrity/influencer softball game, a scholarship gala, and new in 2025, a parade down Peachtree Street.

The 404 area code was first introduced in 1947 when it covered the entire state of Georgia.[24] It has since become a shorthand for Atlanta's cultural identity, particularly what many refer to as Old Atlanta — a rapidly vanishing era before hypergentrification began to redraw the city's racial and economic lines. Having a 404 area code still carries weight for people who were born and raised in Atlanta, even as area codes have multiplied and neighborhoods have transformed.

As a cultural anthropologist who studies labor, race, and technology, I cannot help but put Atlanta's 404 area code in conversation with another kind of 404: the internet kind. The one that signals something missing: Error 404: Not Found. A 404 message appears when the connection between a user and a destination breaks down.[25] Maybe the site has moved. Maybe the link is dead. Maybe there was a human error along the way. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: what you were looking for simply isn't there anymore.

AI Day/Month/Year in the A

New Horizon Baptist Church during AI Day in the A 2025. Image Credit: Anuli Akanegbu, PhD.

In addition to the parade on Peachtree Street, another tentpole program was added to the schedule for 404 Day 2025: AI Day in the A. Powered by Microsoft, which celebrated its 50th anniversary on the very same day, AI Day in the A was driven by community leaders and organizations across a myriad of sectors with a mission to "make Generative AI super accessible for everyone." According to one AI Day in the A organizer I interviewed:

> The goal is to have people get curious if they don't have a general understanding. Like, to introduce AI to them and keep feeding into that curiosity with the end goal being that people are starting to become certified and becoming, maybe not subject matter experts, but just having a strong AI literacy.

At AI Day in the A, I witnessed a genuine desire from community groups and local organizers to make AI tools legible and accessible to everyday Atlantans. And, to their credit, the programming reflected that intention with workshops designed for all ages and levels of knowledge. One memorable experience I had that day was sitting inside of the sanctuary at New Horizon Baptist Church in the Westhaven neighborhood of Atlanta. While there, Cloud Services professional Alvin Myers taught local pastors and pastoral staff how to use generative AI to "elevate ministry" not just on Sundays and Wednesdays, but for everyday matters such as teaching Sunday school, organizing outreach programs, and helping ministers craft their sermons. The two-hour workshop opened with a prayer led by one of the pastors in attendance, asking that the information shared that day be used "for His glory" and be made useful for everyone present. I later smiled at the sincerity of one workshop participant's question as Myers introduced ChatGPT to the room: "Generative AI. Is that included in the free or do you have to pay for it?"

From this ethnographer's perspective, the whole month of April 2025 felt like AI Month in the A because another event, Atlanta AI Week, powered by Enterprise Technology Association, took place just a few weeks later. Attendees of the three-day event were primarily a mix of entrepreneurs and white-collar professionals. Unlike the free community programming at "AI Day in the A," participating in Atlanta AI Week at the Atlanta Tech Village in Buckhead (Atlanta's wealthiest commercial and residential district) came with a price tag of $160.83, signaling that not every AI event is "for everyone" or "included in the free."

"If AI is going to be solved anywhere, it's Atlanta," said one panelist during the first day of programming. Panelists at Atlanta AI Week overall spoke at length about the urgency of preparing for AI through education and credentialing. This sense of urgency seemed to assume that opportunity automatically reaches those who are prepared, ignoring the barriers (like the cost of entry) that can block access long before preparation even matters.

Atlanta is a city eager to leverage the popularity and power of artificial intelligence to become a top tech hub.

Atlanta is a city eager to leverage the popularity and power of artificial intelligence to become a top tech hub. Speakers at Atlanta AI Week made impassioned cases for training high schoolers, educating parents, launching skilling bootcamps, and credentialing displaced workers. I heard similar cases later made by panelists during Atlanta Tech Week and at the RenderATL conference as I scurried and squeezed through rooms of tech professionals, entrepreneurs, college students, and, yes, displaced workers — many already *with* credentials. Atlanta Tech Week notably hosted an AI summit at RenderATL 2025[26] bringing together some of the top minds and leaders in AI. Also offered was programming for a Silicon South summit that facilitated conversations around innovation, investment, and entrepreneurship focused on the goal of the city's boosters for Atlanta to become nationally perceived as a top five tech hub.

Although AI was the central theme of every tech-focused event I attended in 2025 for fieldwork and advancing AI literacy through education and credentialing was a central topic of discussion, there were few discussions about which credentials matter most to employers, even when prompted. During the Q&A segment of one Atlanta AI Week session, an audience member asked a question that I would hear asked at nearly every public program I attended during the course of my fieldwork: What are the most-in-demand skills that workers need today? Each time the audience member would be met with a variation of the same response: Tech skills like coding are becoming commodities, but being a human and having human judgment is a more valuable skill.

Women in AI & Tech Breakfast during Atlanta AI Week.
Image Credit: Anuli Akanegbu, PhD.

A few popular catch phrases turned into a mental bingo game of sorts for me at these events: (1) "AI is not coming for your job, people who are using AI are," (2) "hard skills can be taught, so soft skills are still the most important," (3) "we need to keep the human in the loop," (4) "AI should influence decisions, but not necessarily make the final decisions," and (5) "AI is here to stay, so you might as well get with it." I won bingo every time.

But as a labor researcher who truly wants to see Georgia become first for workers and not just for business, I also lost every time because it seems that these human traits so often described as invaluable are rarely valued in the actual hiring process. Workers are told to be creative, curious, and emotionally intelligent, but those same traits are filtered out by algorithmic screening tools that reward keyword matches and conformity over individuality and potential. It's hard not to see

the contradictions of wires crossed: What happens when the "human in the loop" gets caught in the wires? Who gets protected and who gets outsourced when the priorities of employers differ from the capacity of workers?

The juxtaposition of pride and loss in Atlanta's 404 paired with the absence signaled by the internet's 404 feels eerily appropriate for a city navigating rapid technological change. We're living in a moment where AI is being sold as the future, where upskilling and reskilling are framed as solutions to economic precarity, and where "keeping the human in the loop" is increasingly cited as a safeguard against algorithmic harm.

The phrase "keeping the human in the loop" is meant to suggest that human oversight will ensure ethical or effective outcomes in automated systems. It carries different meanings depending on who is doing the labor, under what conditions, and for whose benefit. While it is frequently positioned as a technical fix, I have seen firsthand how power-users of the phrase often fail to address the power dynamics embedded in human-machine configurations.

In Atlanta, many workers find themselves caught in a kind of economic and technological limbo. Here, they are promised inclusion in the "future of work," yet are routinely denied stable access to the resources, networks, and protections that would make participation meaningful. The notion of keeping the human in the loop is not just a design principle, it is a sociopolitical question of which humans, doing what work, are seen as valuable enough to loop in.

"Labour/Resources". Image courtesy of Clarote & AI4Media via Better Images of AI and Creative Commons 4.0

Is Talent Truly King in Atlanta's Age of AI? A Tale of Two Workers in One City.

Mannequin displaying the Silicon South hoodie during Silicon South Summit.
Image Credit: Anuli Akanegbu, PhD.

Since the late 1940s, city boosters in Atlanta — composed of a biracial coalition of white business elites and leaders from Atlanta's newly enfranchised Black middle class[27] — have worked to brand the city as a *progressive* place through the construction of a sociocultural identity of innovation and inclusion that has been produced by the manipulation of history, heritage, shared meanings, and cultural narratives. Today, Atlanta's city boosters are keen on rebranding the city as a top five tech hub and the center of what is beginning to be referred to as the Silicon South.[28]

While at Atlanta Tech Week, I saw people sporting tan sweatshirts with the phrase "Silicon South" emblazoned in hot pink on the front with the words "est 2019" on the sleeve. I would see the same sweatshirts available to purchase at the RenderATL conference marketplace later that week. Besides the snazzy branding and apparel, what makes the Silicon South stand out from Silicon Valley?

I asked one local technology industry insider to break it down for me, and here's what they said: "Why Atlanta? What is happening here that makes this even a relevant conversation? Where are the advantages for a city like Atlanta? There are a few, I think, that are really obvious. One is talent."

They expanded upon this point with the following commentary: "There's 19,000 STEM graduates that come from our area colleges and universities. It's everything from Georgia Tech to Emory, Georgia State, AUC, Kennesaw State, and so many others that feed into that funnel of really impressive tech talent. So, that's a huge differentiator for us."

Key to maximizing this differentiator, they said, is supporting and keeping talent in Atlanta, "especially, you know, in the age of AI where talent is king." However, from my conversations with workers in Atlanta, very few feel like part of the city's Royal Family in the age of AI.

Precarity Has a Passport: Taiwo's Story

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Photo by Lukas Souza for Unsplash

I met Taiwo[29] twice in one week — briefly at Atlanta Tech Week and then again at RenderATL. Both Atlanta Tech Week and RenderATL are key sites where the city's promises of tech-driven opportunity meet the lived realities of workers trying to start up.

For Nigerian-born Taiwo, whose immigration status governs his every employment decision, Atlanta's self-promotion as a hub for innovation and inclusion is tangled up with the legal, racial, and structural exclusions that define life for many foreign-born workers. The legal constraints of Optional Practical Training and H-1B sponsorship dictate the limited timeframes that international graduate students like Taiwo have to secure stable, e-verified employment.[30] In his experience, employers often dismiss candidates who need sponsorship: "Once you say that you are international and you need sponsorship, they just take you off the job. So that has already been hard since I came to the United States. And then graduating with my master's and then looking for a specific job in Atlanta."

Even when employers submit petitions, the H-1B selection process operates as a lottery, offering no guarantees. Now, the visa program itself is under renewed threat with the Trump administration's plans to restrict approvals to only those petitions accompanied by a $100,000 payment.[31] This pay-to-play model threatens to price out many smaller firms and emerging tech firms that rely on global talent pipelines, concentrating access to only the most capital-rich companies. Moreover, the fee's burden will fall unevenly on international students, like Taiwo, who seek transitions into US employment and whose years of advanced study, corporate internships, and networking have not provided him with even a semblance of stability. Taiwo is instead caught in loops of temporary placements, nonrenewed filings, and fallback work in the gig economy as a DoorDasher or working for friends' businesses. He's racing against the clock of immigration deadlines and now, a more difficult petition process.

Taiwo's Missed Connections

During a Zoom conversation, Taiwo described how his experience at Atlanta Tech Week and RenderATL differed from his experience at the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) conference. At NSBE, he knew exactly who the recruiters were because their shirts, their booths, and their branded paraphernalia identified them. At RenderATL, by contrast, "you don't know who's hiring for a job, per se, so you have to make sure you're on your A-game when you're talking to every single person." What struck me in our conversation was not just the performance required, but the sense of surveillance and judgment built into these encounters. Sociologist Erving Goffman refers to these ritual elements in social interaction as "face work."[32]

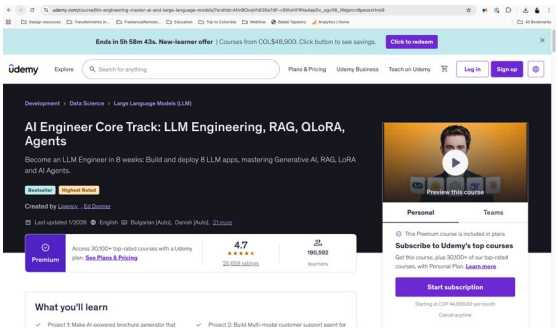
In-person interactions allowed Taiwo to "sell his personality" in ways that online applications don't permit. He expressed a deep disdain for the digital job hunt: "I hate it with a passion," he said, likening it to, "throwing your name into an ocean of other applications." At one point, Taiwo told me he grew so frustrated with online applications that he began showing up at the Atlanta airport daily, using leftover flights from a previous role to clear TSA and ultimately station himself at bars and gates with his résumé and laptop in his backpack. "I just go to different gates, sit by the bar, look to my left, look to my right, try to judge if someone is using their computer … let them know that I'm traveling, I'm also looking for a job."

This creative yet admittedly desperate strategy reveals not just his resourcefulness but the sheer scarcity of accessible entry points into Atlanta's tech economy for someone with his background which, mind you, includes a graduate degree in data science and analytics from a Carnegie Research 1 (R1) institution[33] located in the Midwest. Even though "retraining international students trained in the US" is promoted by the Council of Economic Advisers, an agency within the executive office of the president, as a strategy to address the rising demand for AI talent, international graduates like Taiwo still face precarious and uncertain career outcomes.

"I hate it with a passion," he said, likening it to, "throwing your name into an ocean of other applications."

"I told my friend years ago that AI is going to be the next big thing," Taiwo recalled. He regrets not taking more initiative to learn AI sooner: "I wish I was learning everything back then when I said it was going to be the future, but I feel like now I'm just trying to catch up and make sure I'm at least a little bit on the cusp, so I'm not too behind. It's a love-hate relationship."

Despite his eagerness to learn, Taiwo has not participated in any formal AI training programs offered by an employer, school, or organization. He thinks this is because he is not currently in the right social networks for them to have been marketed directly to him, underscoring how awareness and access are shaped by existing relationships. When opportunities are primarily distributed through existing social networks and selective employment pipelines, entire segments of the workforce, such as foreign-born individuals like Taiwo, are left out of the loop.



Screenshot of the Udemy program "AI Engineer Core Track: LLM Engineering, RAG, QLoRA, Agents"

Several workers I interviewed pointed to a lack of awareness about existing programs as a major barrier. As Taiwo put it, "Marketing has to be the number one goal for your team, wherever you're located." What does it mean to design inclusive digital skilling programs if the people most in need of support don't know they exist? This gap in awareness reflects a broader failure of workforce development systems which often treat awareness and access as matters of individual initiative, rather than shared responsibility. It is not just a missed connection; it is a structural signal of exclusion.

Taiwo ultimately turned to online platform Udemy to learn large language machine engineering through a project-based course: "That class has been exposing me to different packages and different online tools that I can use to actually, you know, build models, train models, different datasets. I actually feel like I'm on the right path."

"Skate to Where the Puck Is Going"

During a Zoom interview conducted as part of this study, a seasoned cloud computing professional offered the following advice to younger workers navigating today's AI-driven labor market: "I would say to anybody who's looking, especially from our communities, the underserved communities, skate to where the puck is going. Understand what it does, what it doesn't do. Understand how it can actually add value and actually how it could add value to you in your current role." For him, keeping up with technologies like cloud computing or AI means anticipating them. His hockey metaphor speaks to the relentless forward motion expected of workers in today's economy where staying still often feels like falling behind and falling behind means that you may never get in the game.

Taiwo's story highlights how the intersection of race, immigration status, and neoliberal restructuring produces a form of labor precarity that is both local and global. He is part of a transnational pipeline of skilled Black labor — recruited through education and internships, but systematically denied permanence in the very economy that depends on his skills. His airport hustle and his reliance on gig work illustrate how workers absorb the costs of navigating an economy that is celebrated as a hub of inclusivity but structured by exclusion.

Taiwo's precarious position as a foreign-born worker contrasts in important ways with the story of Laila, an Atlanta native whose experience in the city's tech economy is shaped not by immigration law, but largely by gender and age. Together, their narratives illuminate how both global and local dynamics intersect to determine who gets to stay in Atlanta's labor market.

The Seeds of a Career: Laila's Story

"I'm definitely in the planting-my-seeds phase," Laila told me as we sat outside a coffee shop in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood. A homegrown talent raised in the metro area, she had recently graduated from Georgia State University and was navigating the uncertain terrain of her first entry-level job hunt in Atlanta.

Laila spoke of her aspirations to break into the tech-adjacent field of marketing research, the very industry where I had begun my career. "I would love to be conducting interviews or moderating focus groups," she confided, expressing a genuine enthusiasm for entering the marketing research space. But that excitement was quickly tempered by a sobering observation: "I think what I've been learning more about the research space, though, is that it's just not very diverse outside of white people." And she's right: Although the marketing industry is predominantly female, data from the Association of National Advertisers reveals that ethnic diversity in the field remains poor.[34]

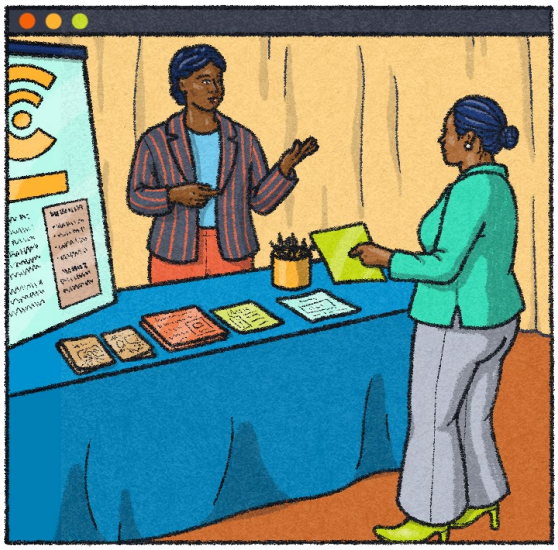
Laila's observation arguably speaks to the systemic obstacles that make it difficult for Black women to break into fields like marketing research, which, anecdotally from my own experience, is an industry that often relies on opaque hiring practices, informal gatekeeping networks, and credentialing systems that reward proximity to elite institutions rather than lived experience or community-based knowledge. The underrepresentation she observed reflects deeper problems in how expertise is defined, valued, and cultivated.

As two Black women with career aspirations in research, our conversation quickly became a space of mutual exchange. I offered small bits of career advice to Laila as she relayed her thoughts on AI, labor, and the ways that race, gender, and age intersect with the production and recognition of knowledge in Atlanta's tech-adjacent labor market.

Sowing Skills in Automated Fields

"I'm going to get the paid version once I start working," Laila shares with me, highlighting her preference for ChatGPT over other tools like Microsoft Copilot because it is "very user friendly." Her ease with using AI is representative of many young adults who are increasingly relying on these tools for everyday tasks — from drafting cover letters to summarizing therapy sessions[35] — as they try to keep up with the demands of the labor market. Laila detailed her AI-assisted preparation for interviews: "I had a phone screening earlier, and I will kind of use it whenever I have interviews to help me create a template on the company, their mission statement, behavioral questions, and then how it relates to that specific job." Later in our conversation, she thinks aloud, this time more critically about her reliance on AI: "I'm going to ChatGPT very prematurely … not giving myself time to think, because I'm like, why am I thinking this long when I could just ask GPT?" Laila's comments demonstrate that the logic of accelerated productivity, amplified by AI, structures not only how work is done, but how individuals think, feel, and perform while at work. "Everything is just so quick … you're finishing things faster so you can do more things. We all have a laundry list of all the things we need to be doing," she laments. The laundry list of tasks she describes speaks to a culture of precarity in which young adults like Laila, disproportionately women and people of color, are compelled to move at the pace of a labor market that values speed over deliberation.

"I'm going to ChatGPT very prematurely … not giving myself time to think, because I'm like, why am I thinking this long when I could just ask GPT?"



Cover artwork detail. Image by Elly Rodgers

The impact of generative AI's widespread adoption on college graduates and early-career workers ages 22 to 25 has been well documented in news headlines and research studies. Generative AI is trained to take on the kinds of foundational, stepping-stone work that junior employees traditionally perform such as desktop research, basic data analysis, and routine communications.[36] A July 2025 report titled *No Country for Young Grads* by The Burning Glass Institute identifies AI-powered expertise upheaval as one of four interlocking factors reshaping entry-level employment, noting that "for the first time in modern history, a bachelor's degree is failing to deliver on its fundamental promise: access to professional employment."[37] Their study reveals that young, entry-level workers are finding fewer employment opportunities in white-collar roles such as customer service and administrative support, where AI is being used to replace rather than to augment labor. Data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York additionally shows that the unemployment rate for college graduates has risen 30 percent since September 2022, compared to about 18 percent for all workers.[38] This generational disruption is a critical example of how AI is destabilizing established labor market pathways to redefine who gets to access, participate in, and advance within the labor market.

Laila feels that entry-level workers aren't given adequate time to develop new skills, especially digital skills, because of the widespread assumption that young people are inherently tech savvy. As she puts it:

> Very opposing things are being said at the same time. Like, "Oh well, they should know how to do this." But there's not proper time to train because "Well, y'all use AI, right, y'all should know how to do this really quickly. It shouldn't take time because you guys are tech savvy." But how are we supposed to learn anything? Then we're using AI for everything and they're like, "Well, they use AI for everything." So, what are we supposed to do?

Laila is eager to learn on the job, but she feels constrained not just by assumptions tied to her race, but also by those linked to her age and academic background as a marketing major. "I want a job where I can learn. I'm not just trying to come in and have to do a bunch of stuff. I want to learn

new things I don't know how to do," she explains. "And I feel like right now it's more like 'Oh, you're young, you should do all the social media stuff.' I want to learn *new* stuff."

I would run into Laila months later at the RenderATL conference, where through a network connection she was able to secure a free entry to the recruitment fair and listen in on panels. There she recognized the cultural visibility of AI in the city: "I feel like the different events and conferences I've been to, they've been speaking more about AI," she said. But she was skeptical of formalized AI certification programs: "What exactly do you mean by AI literacy? For me to get a certificate to use ChatGPT is crazy … maybe if it was something more difficult beyond prompting, then I think that's what I'd be more interested in." Laila interprets the term "AI literacy" not as a neutral skill but as a credential that has been commodified in a landscape of performative innovation: "Now companies just have to say AI so they don't look like they're not thinking about it … it's literally a buzzword. It makes you sound more professional and up to date on trends."

Despite her embrace of AI and her commitment to staying in Atlanta, Laila's experiences reflect the constraints of the local job market that promotes innovation and inclusion, but struggles to make room for its own. When I followed up with her a few months after our last encounter at RenderATL she shared that she had accepted a paid marketing research fellowship in New York City and would be moving before the end of the summer. Even as young workers like Laila embrace new technologies, their talent and adaptability are not always rewarded locally. AI may accelerate the work they do, but it cannot, on its own, ensure homegrown talent access to new opportunities.

A growing number of nonprofits and social enterprises across the city are working to reverse this trend by helping workers seed viable careers without having to uproot themselves. Alongside efforts by nonprofits and social enterprises to keep talent rooted in Atlanta, some employers are launching their own internal training initiatives to equip employees to leverage AI for client services — all the while prioritizing their business interests over the interests of their employees.

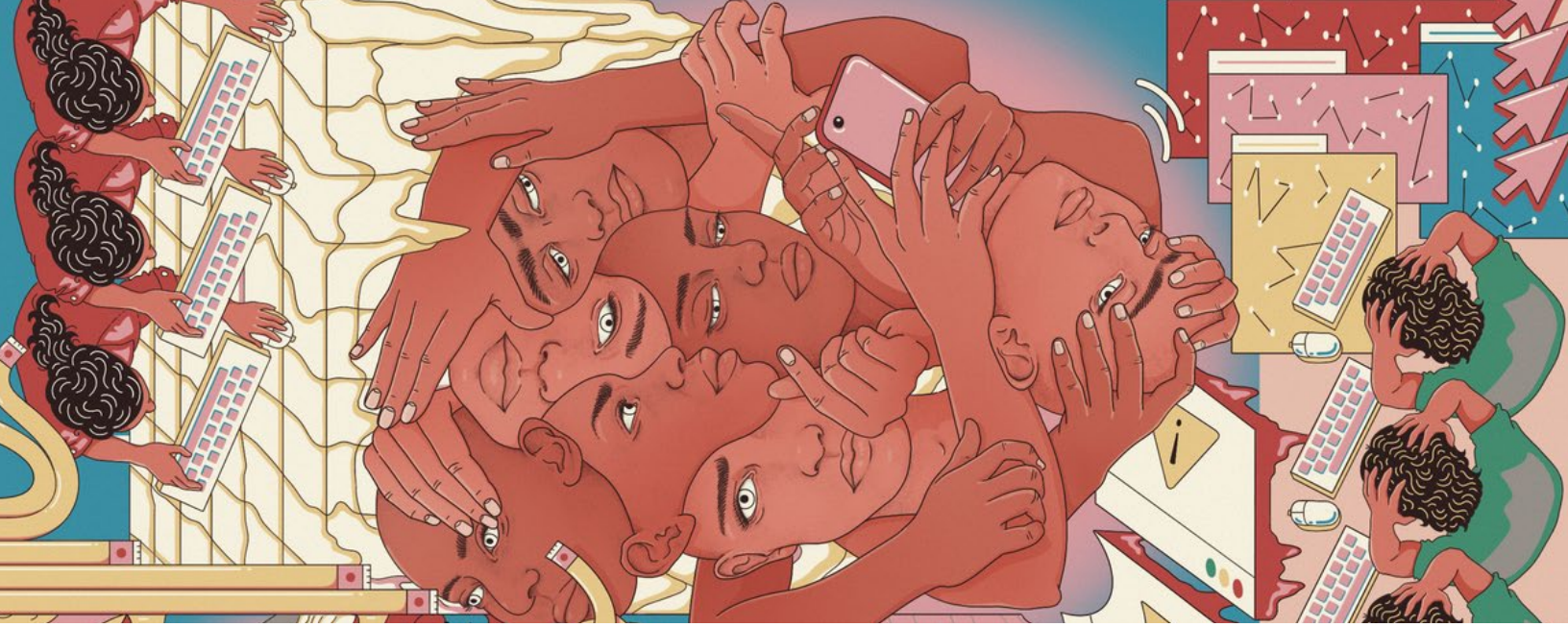


Image courtesy of Clarote & AI4Media via Better Images of AI and Creative Commons 4.0

"Eventually Everyone Will Have to Embrace AI": The Integration of AI into Digital Skilling and the Stakes of Access

"AI falls right in the bucket of emerging technology for us," explained a program manager at an organization that offers tech training to both youth and adults. "So, we look at not only AI, but cybersecurity, data analytics, data science — all those other things as well. But AI, because it's become such a fascinating buzzword in the market to where people who have no real understanding of what AI is are now realizing they've been using AI for years." Drawing a historical parallel, he likened the current moment to the internet's dot-com era: "We all live on the internet, right? There would not be the type of production that we've had in the past 30 years without the internet. And I foresee AI going in that same direction and having that same trajectory to where eventually everyone will have to embrace AI."

Debates aside about whether the AI boom is a bubble primed to burst, the current moment is indeed repeating a familiar pattern from the dot-com era, where speculative hype is creating new markets while intensifying old inequalities in power. Today, the Federal Reserve is lowering interest rates and the Trump administration is driving a broader deregulatory push across the financial system — measures that have historically widened income inequality by inflating asset prices for wealthy investors while eroding the savings of lower-income households.

Taken together, these dynamics signal that the AI boom is happening under economic conditions that are strikingly similar to those that shaped the dot-com era which suggests that without structural reforms the AI era will reproduce, if not exacerbate, the same patterns of speculative growth and concentrated power that defined the late 1990s. Even if the program manager's belief that, "everyone will have to embrace AI" eventually proves true, without confronting the systemic obstacles to accessing training opportunities and sustaining long-term employment, fully embracing AI risks replicating the very inequities that these so-called emerging technologies purport to disrupt in their marketing narratives.

I encountered a wide range of workforce intermediaries in Atlanta inclusive of nonprofits, social enterprises, academic institutions, and the philanthropic arms of for-profit corporations — each carrying their own priorities, funding structures, and levels of accessibility for learners. Through in-depth interviews, it became clear that nonprofit programs in particular operate under chronic financial strain and staffing shortages that threaten their ability to scale or sustain services for underserved groups. As illustrated in this section, nonprofits are often tasked with delivering not only training but also the wraparound support services such as childcare and flexible scheduling that make participation possible, while employer-sponsored initiatives often allow companies to market an "AI-enabled" workforce as an asset while avoiding any obligation to raise wages or compensate employees for the additional skills they're expected to bring. What follows is an overview of the mismatch in expectations between what program participants expect and what programs currently offer.

South of Support (SOS): The Strain on Nonprofits to Answer the Call Without a Lifeline

Access to job training opportunities in the United States is not distributed equally across regions. Despite having some of the greatest need, workers in the South and West are less likely to have proximate access to federally funded workforce development programs and training providers compared to those in the Midwest and Northeast.[39] Since nonprofit organizations are the most prevalent training providers in the South, already overstretched organizations in Atlanta are placed with a disproportionate burden to fill the gaps left by limited public investment.

My conversation with Yvette, a program manager at one of Atlanta's STEM-focused nonprofits, began with a recurring theme: the hype cycle around emerging technologies like AI and the rush to get people ready for the future. "There's this recognition in the industry that we are not prepared to facilitate the growth of that industry," she told me. "And they say, 'We need people, we need people, we need people.'"

But what happens after that call? What infrastructure is in place to support the learners who are supposed to become those people? "Nobody wants to hear that it's going to take five years to roll out a thoughtful curriculum," she said. "There's this need for immediate, instant gratification. We're doing it now because we want to say we're doing it now." She likened the rush to an imperialistic impulse, a uniquely American anxiety about falling behind on the global stage: "We don't want to hear from other countries that they're first in this, that they're doing this better than us. They're doing this before we do. It's this American identity kind of thing, like we have to be at the forefront of everything. And that's often at the expense of, you know, the population."

Cover artwork detail. Image by Elly Rodgers

Our conversation later turned inward and toward her own experience participating in a 12-week cybersecurity bootcamp in 2022. When I asked whether the program meaningfully shaped her career, she paused before answering. "For me, it wasn't entirely helpful," she admitted. "I was disinterested. I think that there are other people who got more out of it, but at the time, I didn't see the risks outweighing the benefits for my particular situation."

Yvette is a single mother and her son's access to a quality school was tied directly to her employment status. If she changed jobs, he'd be rezoned to the neighborhood school. "It's not a terrible school," she said, "but I felt like I needed better for him. So I wasn't at the time ready to make the change when I went through the program." When she was finally ready to reengage and make a change to pivot her career, she reached out only to be met with silence. "It was crickets. There was no follow-up or anything like that. So, I think that's another piece or component that really is important that a lot of these bootcamps don't focus on. Some do, some don't."

That moment of silence — "it was crickets" — was more than a dead link. It symbolized a mismatch between the expectations of program participants and the reality of what programs have to offer. And while the programs I followed promised to walk with participants *not just during* the program, but *through the pivot*, and into a new chapter of life, rarely, if ever, did they guarantee that a specific job would be written into a participant's story. Instead, what is promised is that participants would be equipped with the skills and industry exposure to competitively chart a new path ahead for themselves after the program.

It's this American identity kind of thing, like we have to be at the forefront of everything. And that's often at the expense of, you know, the population."

As a program-participant–turned–programming-professional, Yvette has experienced firsthand how resources flow, how priorities are set, and how easily people at the margins can fall through the cracks once the cohort ends and the press releases are published. What she was pointing to wasn't just a matter of follow-up, it was about continuity and care. It was about recognizing that transformation isn't linear, and support cannot be confined to the limited window of a training course. For many working-class people, especially Black women navigating motherhood, employment, and education all at once, the real breakthroughs often come after life settles and the timing is better. The story of support systems that start strong but fade too soon is one I heard more than once from adult learners during my fieldwork. It's a reminder that in Atlanta's workforce landscape, skilling and industry exposure alone are not enough to connect talent to opportunity.

For Black Women Who Have Translated Bureaucratic Mandates into Accessible, Culturally Responsive Interventions / When the Support is Not Enough[40]

Like Yvette, other Black women I spoke with offered similar dual perspectives of once participating in workforce training programs and now managing similar programs or efforts to lift as they climb. This pattern is illustrative of the equity ethics[41] framework which foregrounds an individual's commitments to racial and social justice and to the well-being of communities facing systemic inequities. Developed by education scholar Ebony McGee, the equity ethics framework helps contextualize how racially underrepresented students in STEM fields navigate and push back against systemic barriers in both their academic and professional lives. This kind of emancipatory data science[42] also reflects what Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls an "ethic of caring," where lived experience becomes not only a source of knowledge but also a method of leadership.[43] Yvette's politically engaged ethic of caring demonstrates how Black women, often undervalued within formal systems, are doing the invisible work of translating bureaucratic programs into accessible, culturally responsive interventions. Her insider-outside status as a Black woman makes her especially attuned to the material, emotional, and temporal barriers that others might overlook, including the need for holistic wraparound support services for program participants.

Black women in the professional-managerial class — those who sell their labor like workers, but are also tasked with managing capitalism itself — have long functioned as intermediaries between the working class and the capitalist class. Prone to exhibiting entrepreneurial behavior in their jobs that is both time and resource intensive, akin to that of a venture laborer,[44] Black women are positioned as agents of progress, often employed in roles to "manage change" through services like diversity, equity, and inclusion; education; human resources; and nonprofit work. But in practice, and in the context of large institutions, these roles often limit Black women to maintaining the standard operating system, not reprogramming it. And yet, it is precisely those who face racism and sexism — Black women chief among them — who carry the clearest understanding of what genuine institutional change requires and how an equitable economy can actually be built.[45]

Recent waves of layoffs reveal that when the rhetoric of inclusion no longer serves the bottom line, even the managers of change become expendable. Research from the Brookings Institution notes that clerical and administrative jobs — many held by women of color — face particularly high exposure to automation.[46] These roles have long served as vital pathways to stability and upward mobility for lower-middle-class workers, especially Black women without college degrees. Their erosion threatens to deepen existing racial and gender disparities in employment and economic security. This is already evident in data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics showing that more than 300,000 Black women left (author's note: were pushed out of) the workforce between February and June 2025[47] — a signal not only of economic precarity but, yet again, of the growing mismatch between the futures institutions promise and the futures that workers can reasonably expect to access.

In another interview, I spoke with a career and life coach who works within the adult workforce development pillar of a different nonprofit. Our conversation took place over Zoom, but the weight of her words cut through the screen with a clarity that spoke to her years of operating inside systems, such as the nonprofit sector and education sector, that are far from efficient.

She didn't hesitate when I asked about barriers to participation in workforce training programs. "That's a wonderful question that I really appreciate you asking," she said with a sigh of relief. Too often, she explained, the nonprofits tasked with equipping low-income workers with the skills to succeed in a shifting economy are expected to perform miracles under tight constraints. "We get these grant dollars and we're just expected to make things happen," she said. But without wraparound support services like childcare or flexible scheduling, many of the clients she works with simply can't participate. That's why, she told me, every prospective participant is required to attend an info session. "You have to be very intentional about which one you pick," she said, referring to the different training pathways offered by her organization, ranging from full-time IT bootcamps with training center partners to self-paced certification options through Google Coursera.

She shared that the IT bootcamps, for example, run Monday through Friday from "8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.," regardless of whether it's in person or remote. That schedule alone disqualifies a large share of prospective students, many of whom are working full-time jobs that barely pay the bills as warehouse workers, fast food workers, and retail workers. "They have to work. They're the primary breadwinners," she said plainly. For them, the Google Coursera option might be the only viable path. But even that route has its barriers. "You have to teach yourself," she explained. "You have to have the self-discipline to stay on a schedule." For people who have never experienced formal higher education or continued learning environments, asking them to independently navigate a digital credentialing system without consistent support is a tall order. "By week two or three, you probably forgot you got that Google certification license that you should be working on," she said.

Too often, she explained, the nonprofits tasked with equipping low-income workers with the skills to succeed in a shifting economy are expected to perform miracles under tight constraints.

Her nonprofit is experimenting with solutions like structured study halls and biweekly check-ins to increase retention and completion, but even those solutions aren't full fixes. For example, some grants are county-specific based on funder priorities, meaning that someone who lives in Fulton County might not qualify for a training program funded for Cobb County residents. In those cases, all she can do is refer them elsewhere — to WorkSource Atlanta or DeKalb, or to peer organizations like Goodwill or the Bobby Dodd Institute. At times, she and her colleagues are able to provide small incentives like a $200 monthly stipend for clients actively enrolled in training, however, as she acknowledges, "That still is not enough for you to not be able to work full-time."

What emerged most clearly in our conversation was the burden of choice wherein students (which her organization refers to as "clients") are often forced to choose between survival and skill-building, between putting food on the table today and investing in a better job for tomorrow. Although she and her colleagues do what they can to help clients "navigate the maze," as she put it, they are ultimately constrained by the very systems they are trying to work within. "You're going to have to pick one," she tells her clients honestly. "These are your options."

Workforce development in Atlanta isn't just about pipelines and placements, it's also about people making game-time decisions under impossible conditions, and the providers who are trying to level the playing field for them. My interactions with nonprofits made it clear that workforce development in Atlanta is embedded within a larger ecosystem of scarcity, inequity, and hard choices. The fact that program participants are routinely forced to choose between subsistence and self-improvement reveals the insufficiency of top-down calls from power brokers such as city boosters, employers, philanthropists, and policymakers that do not account for the structural barriers that shape people's lives. As a result, workforce development efforts often assume a baseline of stability — time, income, transportation, housing, childcare — that many Atlantans do not have. Thus, programs designed to promote social mobility can inadvertently reinforce precarity when they are not paired with financial support to offset the costs of participation as well as comprehensive wraparound support services. The strain felt by both participants and training providers alike reveals a workforce training system stretched to its limits. It is critical that this system be reimagined if it is to serve as a true pathway to opportunity rather than as a stopgap for survival.

As Atlanta's nonprofits stretch to meet expanding demands from program funders and program participants, the accelerating integration of AI into established job training programs is introducing not only new tools, but new fault lines for Black workers, who are often expected to adapt to rapidly changing technologies through skills-based training without guaranteed career advancement or, at least, higher pay in the interim.

"This Is Where We're Moving as a Society, so You Should Just Get With It": AI Education and Adoption Among White-Collar Workers

My ethnographic study found that standalone AI training for professional development was far more likely to appear in white-collar settings, where employers offered self-paced, online modules as upskilling opportunities for current employees either through internal proprietary platforms or public platforms like LinkedIn Learning. This "great training paradox" as labor scholars describe it, highlights how workforce development resources are often reserved for already highly educated workers, reinforcing occupational hierarchies that leave those at the bottom with limited pathways for advancement. As scholar of economic development Nichola Lowe argues, "Skill development is not simply a precursor to accessing good jobs, as is often presumed by those advocating for a more educated workforce. Rather, skill development is constitutive of a quality job."[48]

During one of my research interviews, an operations associate at a Professional Employer Organization that supports small businesses in managing 401(k) plans reflected on her recent experience participating in an optional, company-sponsored AI training course. She shared that the course prompted her to rethink her assumptions about AI's role in her day-to-day responsibilities, admitting that prior to the training she viewed AI systems as sources of objective truth. Now, she approaches them with greater discernment, understanding them as tools that can support, but not replace, her human judgment. "At the end of the day," she emphasized, "always check your references."

Though it wasn't mandatory, the course was "encouraged." "I wouldn't use the word 'pressure,'" she told me. "But there is definitely a nudge towards being more comfortable with it as opposed to being afraid of it." That encouragement, however, came with little context as there was no clear articulation of how AI integration might affect her current role or support her future career growth. "It would be good for you to learn more about this," she inferred, but no one explained why. For her, that lack of explanation felt like a missed connection: "I'd like to hear that it'll help us, it'll take care of manual tasks … that way it leaves room for us to focus on other projects and other things. And I'd like to hear more about the benefits. But I think that instead, it's just very like 'this is where we're moving as a society, so you should just get with it.'"

One technical project manager working inside the Atlanta office of a global tech conglomerate candidly shared her thoughts with me on the AI certification offered by her employer:

> The purpose behind this for my role is for them to be able to say "Hey, we have so and so many people in our workforce who are familiar with generative AI." Like they want to say that we are more fluent in it … it's a kind of new area, but the certification is supposed to be a representation of that.

She explained that in theory the certification functioned as a symbolic badge of competence and was marketed internally as a credential that signaled an employee's readiness for AI-enabled work. However, she viewed the certification in practice as a line item that helped the firm negotiate rates with clients. "I think from one perspective, it's primarily for us, for them, to be able to say our workforce is skilled and then they can charge a higher rate or whatever … to say, 'Hey, these are the skills that our folks have, so they deserve that,'" she said.

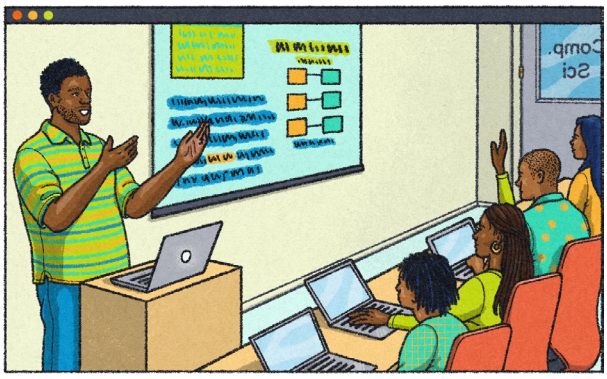
"If they charge a higher rate," I inquired, "do you foresee yourself getting higher pay?" She replied swiftly: "Absolutely not! *[laughs]* It's either to charge a higher rate or to justify their already high rates." The firm could leverage their training as proof of innovation, skill, and value, but none of that value necessarily circled back to the humans in the loop.

Who Digital Skilling Programs Primarily Serve

I had several in-person and virtual interactions with Anthony, a program manager at a workforce training organization whose day-to-day work gives him a front-row seat to how digital skilling and AI preparedness are playing out on the ground. What struck me most was how deftly he has to toggle between communities to meet learners not just where they are, but with the understanding that "where they are" is shaped by histories of structural inequality, proximity to poverty, and gaps in access that training programs alone cannot fully repair.

"We have different populations, different demographics that we serve," Anthony began, emphasizing that one-size-fits-all solutions are not only ineffective, but they're also negligent. "We can't expect somebody who's low education, probably close to the poverty line, to come into class, we start spitting out all this AI jargon, and turn them into an AI machine-learning engineer tomorrow." Instead, the organization designs what he calls a "bridge" — a path into technical upskilling that starts not just with Python or machine learning, but with the basics: turning on a computer, creating an email address, learning to type. For some learners, this is the first time they've sat in front of a keyboard. But he's clear that this bridge isn't about lowering standards, it's about

respecting starting points: "There's a learning curve that has to occur, a mindset shift."



Cover artwork detail. Image by Elly Rodgers

Anthony described three broad groups that his organization serves: (1) entry-level learners starting with digital skills; (2) more advanced students who may have done some self-study or have some traditional education and could, after testing in, pass a cybersecurity or AI class "with flying colors," and (3) small business owners or nonprofit leaders who know their industry inside and out but lack technical skills like data storytelling or AI literacy. "We try to make sure that we cater the education specifically to that demographic … to ensure that they not only have the best opportunity, they learn the most they can, but to also accelerate them to that next phase, whatever that may look like."

As our conversation turned to the labor market, I asked Anthony whether the employers they work with were explicitly seeking job candidates with AI skills. "It depends," he told me. "We forecast that most jobs will need some type of AI literacy … but the issue is a lot of organizations don't know how to implement AI, so they're not necessarily asking for that at this time." He says that he sees the writing on the wall because while AI isn't yet embedded in warehouse or food service roles it is increasingly present in tech-sector work. "Any tech job nowadays is going to have some type of AI embedded within what you're going to be doing on a day-to-day basis," he explained.

I pressed further to ask what it means to train someone for an entry-level job in a world where AI threatens entry-level work. "Well, that's what we're trying to do to combat it," he replied. Anthony's logic is that even in entry-level jobs, AI literacy becomes a differentiator. If 100 people are hired, he conjectures, but only a handful have been trained in how to use AI tools, those few become candidates for internal advancement, or at the very least, better positioned to avoid being replaced. "If you can show the employer that you have AI skills, you may be the person that gets promoted to help manage that AI for that specific job task, whereas other people may be replaced."

"Any tech job nowadays is going to have some type of AI embedded within what you're going to be doing on a day-to-day basis," he explained.

His logic is not unusual among workforce development practitioners, many of whom see upskilling and reskilling as buffers against displacement. What this approach reveals is not a contradiction so much as a continuation: Black workers are still expected to adapt to technologies that threaten their livelihoods, and the burden of employability continues to fall on the individual. In a labor market shaped by racial capitalism, the integration of AI does not disrupt historical patterns, it allows brand managers and power brokers to extend them under the brand of innovation.

Although Anthony's organization offers training specialized in tech jobs like help desk support, cybersecurity, and software engineering, he acknowledged that the investment for those programs required more from students: more time, more certifications, and more professional acumen. Crucially, Anthony says, none of this comes at a financial cost to the student: "We provide it at no cost to the student. I'm not saying there's not a cost. There's always a cost. But we provide it at no cost to the student."

"You don't pay to participate in the class, but you're not making money doing it, right? So, you're not able to take care of your bills. It's a temporary sacrifice, like, it's mentioned upfront, but it's a *big* sacrifice," said Derrick, a student currently enrolled in a local cybersecurity training program.

Derrick, who had previously completed a now-defunct computer science training course, has observed a troubling pattern across so-called free training programs: Classes often overlap with standard working hours, effectively forcing participants to choose between learning and earning. "I won't mention who, but there's people in the class that are going through hard times, *right now*. But they're sticking through, trying to finish up the course in the hopes that this will pay off. And so it's like, I don't know … it kind of feels like a carrot and stick, you know?" For many working-class adult learners like Derrick, free training is anything but because it comes at the expense of stability, income, and in some cases, dignity.

Training programs are frequently marketed as pathways to opportunity, but in practice, they are often designed to cultivate compliance and short-term productivity rather than long-term stability, advancement, or power. For Black workers, especially, these programs can become less a ladder and more a lifeline: a means of surviving within a labor system that has historically demanded resilience without offering reciprocity. Like a treadmill, they offer just enough to keep workers like Derrick in motion, but rarely enough for them to advance.

None of the programs I encountered marketed guaranteed employment even after months, sometimes nearly a year, of sustained participation. While many offered resume-building activities, guest speakers, or corporate field trips, these soft introductions and exposures to industry rarely translated into concrete job offers. For many participants, completing a program and even earning a new certification did not immediately open the door to employment opportunities, because employers favored candidates with traditional four-year degrees, undermining the very logic of skills-based hiring that these programs were meant to advance.

The result is a cycle that traps working-class adult learners in a churn of training. Several participants cycled through multiple credentialing programs, hoping that the next one might provide the elusive foothold into a more secure, better-paying career. What emerged from my fieldwork was not simply the failure of isolated programs, it was the access doctrine in practice. Workers like Derrick aren't just chasing opportunity, they're absorbing the cost of poverty policy that asks more of them but delivers less to them. In this vein, they emerge as surplus labor — skilled but still shut out; credentialed but still unstable; hopeful but still unpaid. This broader failure echoes journalist Brian Goldstone's observation in *There Is No Place for Us*, his book about the lived experiences of Atlanta's working poor: "The myth that hard work will lead to stability has been shattered, revealing a stark disconnect between the story America tells about itself and the reality of deepening precarity."[49] That disconnect becomes even more pronounced in an era when AI is reframing workforce development yet still relying on the same old promise — that access to the right tools and skills will be enough to overcome structural inequities.

What Digital Skilling Programs Currently Offer

Cover artwork detail. Image by Elly Rodgers

With the exception of the employer-sponsored programs described by research participants in white-collar roles, few of the training initiatives I observed over the course of this study focused explicitly on AI. Instead, AI was more often embedded as a secondary topic and introduced not as a core competency, but as a segment or supporting tool within pre-existing digital literacy, cybersecurity, computer science, and job-preparation courses. These courses, many of which offered Python instruction (and, in some cases, certification tracks), framed AI as an aid to navigating the job search process rather than as a domain of employment in its own right.

In job-preparation workshops, AI was positioned as a workaround for the increasingly automated hiring systems that structure entry into the labor market. For example, facilitators introduced tools like Jobscan.co, which analyzes the alignment between a résumé and a job description and produces a numerical match score to essentially train jobseekers to optimize their applications for applicant tracking systems (ATS). "You may be qualified," one facilitator explained, "but you may not be seen because your resume doesn't include the keywords the ATS is looking for."

Platforms like Interviewsby.ai were similarly presented as useful rehearsal spaces for jobseekers where they could upload their résumés alongside job descriptions, respond to AI-generated interview questions, and receive automated feedback on how to improve their answers. In these cases, AI literacy was framed less as technical fluency and more as an adaptive skill for interfacing with opaque systems of evaluation and sorting.

The workforce training programs I observed — whether delivered by nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, or academic institutions — were consistently geared toward working-class adult learners, the majority of whom were Black workers seeking stable, full-time employment. Inside these programs were students who challenged conventional definitions of entry level, despite being trained for primarily entry-level work. Many brought years of experience across sectors such as automotive, hospitality, education, and computer science. For some, the training functioned as upskilling; for others, as reskilling. Yet regardless of provider type or participants' prior experience, the programs funneled learners toward entry-level roles. This uniform approach reveals a troubling contradiction: Even as automation accelerates the disappearance of entry-level work, Atlanta's training infrastructure continues to prepare Black workers for precisely those jobs. Rather than leveraging participants' existing skills for advancement or higher-wage opportunities, the system risks confining them to a cycle of low-return credentialing and occupational instability.

Even as automation accelerates the disappearance of entry-level work, Atlanta's training infrastructure continues to prepare Black workers for precisely those jobs.

These observations invite the question: How might we move beyond the idealized, but rarely realized, train-then-hire model that dominates workforce development in Atlanta to one more akin to an apprenticeship that compensates participants as they learn? The DataWorks program at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) offers a noteworthy alternative to the train-then-hire model.

From the Classroom to Client Work with DataWorks

DataWorks is a data services provider launched in January 2020 as a research initiative housed within Georgia Tech. Today, it operates as a workplace with on-the-job training for novice adult learners from groups historically excluded from computing. DataWorks hires Data Fellows who receive paid, on-the-job training in tools like Microsoft Excel and Python while simultaneously completing real data projects for local businesses, nonprofits, and organizations. "It's a one-year paid work training program," explained Annabel Rothschild, an assistant professor of computer science at Bard College who developed the program's critical data literacy curriculum when she was a PhD student at Georgia Tech. "Most of the folks coming into it have backgrounds in things like customer service. People have had backgrounds in construction … very customer-facing stuff."

The jobs at DataWorks can best be described as stepping-stone jobs that take Fellows from one career path into a new one, says Lara Karki, a PhD student in human-centered computing at Georgia Tech who is studying DataWorks to better understand how adult learners acquire computing skills in the workplace. "I think there's a lot of possibilities with AI for what new work is created that could create new kinds of stepping-stone jobs that are at a big company with good benefits. But, unfortunately, I feel like a lot of the desire to want to teach workers in a job is almost counter to what employers are saying now because they're like 'AI is going to make the work faster' and 'We need someone that knows things,'" Karki explains.

When I spoke with Betsy DiSalvo, an associate professor in the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Tech and lead of the DataWorks project, she explained that DataWorks is embedded as a working organization inside Georgia Tech, operating, as she put it, "basically like a small company." "We do work for clients. We hire people, we train them. The workers spend probably five to ten hours a week on training, job preparedness, I would say — rather than on work itself. Some weeks it's more, some weeks there's very little, depending on how the work comes in and what the needs are," said DiSalvo.

For DiSalvo, this structure has become an unexpected window into observing how low- and mid-level employees are being introduced to new technologies amid a seismic shift in workplace expectations. "It's been a really unique opportunity for us to kind of watch how people are reacting to these changes in the workplace in real time," she told me. "Because how often do you get to go into a company and watch this happen, be able to write about it and see how they're training

more or less entry-level employees to use technology at the same time a huge technological shift is happening? So that's been kind of cool." She pauses in reflection, and says, "I haven't written about that in that way."

DataWorks is the only program I encountered during my study that pays participants to work and learn on the job with the added bonus of health insurance. "Everybody who's coming through it as a Fellow is an employee within Georgia Tech … so you get all the Georgia Tech benefits, which to me is super important because the kind of status quo in a lot of this labor is that it gets contracted overseas and people just get treated like not human," says Rothschild. "The idea is, we see data as a craft and a lot of the Data Fellows reach this point where they are able to act as kind of data consultants."

This is a major distinction in a training landscape where adult learners are too often expected to upskill on their own time and dime. Yet like any program, it has its challenges. In their joint study about the DataWorks program, Karki and colleagues write:

> We consistently run into the issue of being a unique training program. The data work performed at DataWorks is often outsourced to platforms such as Mechanical Turk, or these tasks are completed by someone in addition to another role. Creating a full-time position in data work that focuses on the data itself rather than gleaning insights from data is novel. Further, performing data work in a team setting where data workers have direct contact with clients is also novel.[50]

While this novelty is a strength from a research and innovation perspective, it also creates practical barriers for scaling the model or translating its benefits to the broader labor market. As they also note:

> Potential employers, clients, and partners misinterpret DataWorks due to its connection with an elite technical university. Also, when communicating the program structure to Data Fellow candidates in interviews, we need to explicitly highlight the nature of the position in contrast to training intensives that are completed before getting a job. Now, we are clear about the structure of the program: It is first and foremost a full-time job with a one-year term, and we do not place candidates in their next job.

Although DataWorks offers an alternative vision for adult tech training that embeds skill-building directly within paid work, it still operates within structural constraints that limit its ability to scale beyond its university setting and within a labor market that chronically undervalues training, care, and place-based expertise. Troubleshooting training through a sociotechnical lens requires that we pay attention not only to technical gaps, but also to the cultural, social, and economic conditions that shape the labor market. This calls for participatory approaches that position workers as power brokers in their own right — co-thinkers in narratives of "AI readiness" alongside city boosters, employers, philanthropists, policymakers, and even researchers like me.

To troubleshoot the technical, cultural, social, and economic difficulties that are plaguing the lives of workers in the South and across the nation, we must all commit to reshaping the digital skilling landscape in ways that center equity, sustainability, and the lived realities of working

adults. The final section of this report offers reflections and practical recommendations drawn from the field and grounded in the perspectives of participants and practitioners who are already doing the work.

Conclusion

Access Granted: Troubleshooting for More Equitable Digital Skilling

In my field site of Atlanta, I see a city eager to harness the future, but I also see a city haunted by the inequities of its past and present. The 404 error still lingers. Sometimes it appears as a broken link between talent and opportunity. Sometimes it's an inaccessible program wrapped in polished branding. And sometimes it takes the form of well-intentioned initiatives that don't last long enough. Atlanta may be building an AI-powered future, but without sustained attention to access, equity, and accountability, it risks becoming a beautifully branded site full of "Page Not Found" errors.

Despite an abundance of programs, Atlanta's digital skilling ecosystem remains fractured and unevenly accessible. The city's racialized wealth gap — the widest in the nation — shapes who learns about, enrolls in, and benefits from digital skilling programs. Addressing these inequities requires rethinking outreach and program design altogether. As a social and political construct, AI literacy is often less about technical proficiency and more about performing readiness, and for many workers, it has become a gatekeeping mechanism, shrouded in strategic abstraction that has created new pressures to adapt without corresponding investments in stability or support.

I see a city eager to harness the future, but I also see a city haunted by the inequities of its past and present.

The patterns emerging from Atlanta's workforce ecosystem reflect national challenges that demand structural, not surface-level, solutions. Given this, the nation would benefit from leaning into and learning from the lessons of the South, as federal and state policymakers debate the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and craft new frameworks for AI regulation.

"I Understand That They Want to Reach Out and Help the Community, but the Delivery System Isn't Really Working."

As this report affirms, AI literacy is a social and political construct that has been deployed as a catch-all solution for workforce development by power brokers who have cast it as a neutral and universally attainable skill. But behind the screens of their strategic abstraction are entanglements of

vague definitions and market-driven goals that have reinforced the very exclusions and errors that they claim to solve.

Training alone cannot fix systemic inequities, but it can be better designed to reduce them. As a society, we must move beyond rhetorical commitments to inclusion and invest in systems that make equity real. That means meeting workers where they are, designing programs with care and clarity, and creating not just pathways into the workforce, but bridges within it that lead to lasting and dignified careers for Black workers.

Make Design Decisions That Serve the Public Good

Atlanta's future as a tech hub doesn't just depend on cultivating new skills, it depends on cultivating new systems of accountability and care. First, policymakers and industry leaders must clearly define what constitutes an AI skill for nontechnical workers to ensure that expectations are clear and accessible rather than vague and aspirational. Second, employers must be held accountable for how AI-related competencies are framed and evaluated in job descriptions, hiring operations, and operational practices to prevent biased or opaque assessments that reinforce existing inequities. They must also be held accountable for job quality, not just job creation. Finally, investment should prioritize public-interest technology models that are rooted in community leadership and designed to serve the public good. This includes not only funding the development of such models, but also supporting wraparound services that enable meaningful participation in training programs by historically excluded communities and embedding community partnerships into program delivery[51].

Build Program Awareness Beyond Personal Proximity

Across interviews, adult learners described discovering training opportunities only through word of mouth or sheer luck. For example, Derrick, a cybersecurity trainee, recalled first hearing about his program through a cold LinkedIn message. "Before then," he said, "I had never heard about it either. I understand that they want to reach out and help the community, but the delivery system isn't really working." This fractured communication infrastructure, where the same networks that fuel opportunity also limit its reach, demonstrate that awareness, not only access, is a fundamental equity issue. Public and private sector stakeholders must invest in intentional, multi-channel recruitment strategies that meet learners where they are, online and offline, while properly resourcing trusted community partners — not just organizations, but also individuals with roots in the community — to ensure that opportunities reach beyond well-connected circles. Awareness cannot rely on proximity or privilege; it must be built through visibility, consistency, and transparency.

Integrate Learning into Paid Work

Yet awareness alone is not enough. Atlanta's workforce development landscape reveals an urgent need to realign philanthropic and private sector investments with the needs of workers. In the current model, training alone does not guarantee employment, credentialing does not ensure advancement, and adult learners who adapt to new technologies are not always rewarded for their efforts. These are not failures of individual drive; they are failures of design and funding models.

Workers are trained to get a foot in the door, only to find that door leads to short-term, low-wage, or unstable work. A more useful training model for adult learners is one that integrates learning into paid work, recognizing that time itself is an economic cost for adult learners. Programs that treat training as extracurricular rather than job-embedded add another layer of precarity for working-class participants. Paid stepping-stone roles with benefits, peer support, and structured professional development represent a more equitable program design. These models show that learning must be compensated, not extracted, from workers' limited time and resources. Equitable training systems must provide financial support such as stipends or wages to offset the costs of participation in addition to wraparound supports such as childcare, transportation, broadband, and access to hardware.

New funding models must be designed that embed learners in organizations through stipend-supported apprenticeships, and when possible, transition them into full-time employment. Pay participants for their time, not just their potential. Provide living stipends, paid on-the-job training, and structured mentorship. Employers must also stop defaulting to four-year degree requirements when workers have already demonstrated skill proficiency through alternative credentials. If a program or organization claims a commitment to equity, then it must prove it by investing in people, not just innovation. Equitable alternatives exist, but they can only scale if funders and employers commit real resources toward long-term justice, not just short-term productivity, and if policymakers act boldly to legislate accountability, enforce equity standards, and prioritize secure connections with people in their home network over external actors whose business interests may not align with local needs.

Measure Equity, Don't Just Assume It

Finally, equity must be measured, not assumed. Workforce development programs often track enrollment and completion but stop short of evaluating who actually secures stable employment, earns living wages, or advances in their careers. Furthermore, without disaggregated data on identity markers such as race, class, gender, ability, and neighborhood, it is difficult to determine whether programs are closing gaps or replicating them. Accountability must extend beyond policymakers: Employers should ensure that hiring, promotion, and compensation practices translate training into real opportunities; funders and philanthropic organizations should track long-term career outcomes rather than program outputs alone; program designers and training providers must evaluate where curricula and support services effectively address structural barriers; researchers should expand the scope of their analysis to merge lived experience with data in ways that emphasize dialogue over diagnosis; and local governments and economic development agencies should align initiatives with community needs, rather than with the interests of outside investors. Embodying an ethic of caring requires all these actors to prioritize tangible worker outcomes over optics to establish performance goals and evaluation frameworks that are conscious of the ways in which an individual's identity markers inform their lived experiences.

On Repairing a Corrupted Operating System

AI has not arrived on neutral ground in Atlanta. It builds on the Southern economic development model's entrenched operating system of sorting, excluding, and extracting — one that has long undervalued Black labor while profiting from it. As this report reveals, even when workers learn

new tools, earn new credentials, and network tirelessly, the jobs don't always follow. These are not failures of motivation or merit. They are failures of the systems that claim to be future-ready, but are not justice-ready.

Much like digital infrastructure, an equitable workforce system requires regular redirection and repair. We must actively locate and fix the broken links — not only in training programs, but in hiring practices, policy design, funding flows, research, and evaluation metrics. The stakes of AI adoption are not abstract; they are material, visible, and urgent. They shape who gets access to stable work, who is seen as worth investing in, and who is expected to keep up without ever being fully brought in.

Again, as with the first Industrial Revolution, Georgia offers both a blueprint and a warning: Without care and accountability, the same structural inequities that mechanized the industrial past will become automated in our labor futures. Cotton once powered industries while dispossessing those who harvested it. So, as the country races to sow the seeds of AI innovation, the real question is not just who will reap the rewards, but who will once again be left harvesting the future with no claim to the crop.

Acknowledgments

Forever I Love Atlanta: I am especially grateful to the city of Atlanta which served as the backdrop and heart of this study. This report was not written to solely call out flaws or gaps, but to illuminate patterns, stories, and structural themes that impact the everyday lives of Black workers in Georgia. It was written in the spirit of calling in, not just calling out, with the hope that the insights shared here might help cultivate more equitable, accountable, and imaginative pathways forward.

I extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who shared their time, stories, insights, and lived experiences with me throughout the course of this ethnographic study. Your generosity — whether through formal interviews or more informal kitchen-table talk — shaped this work in so many ways. I also want to thank the brilliant practitioners, researchers, organizers, and everyday thinkers I encountered both in and beyond the field, who challenged my thinking, sharpened my questions, and offered the kind of guidance that only comes from being rooted in community and practice.

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues at Data & Society, whose enthusiasm and steady support nurtured both me and this project from its earliest sprouts of an idea. Special thanks also to Elly Rodgers who produced the cover image and Gloria Mendoza who contributed the layout design as well as the community and peer reviewers whose questions, provocations, comments, and feedback strengthened the work and sharpened my perspective: Richmond Wong, Gabrielle Rejouis, Kiara Childs, Ann Hill Bond, and Thema Monroe-White. This work is a reflection of collective care, intellectual collaboration, and a shared commitment to understanding labor, race, and technology not just as concepts, but as real conditions shaping people's lives.

Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.

Suggested citation: Akanegbu, Anuli, PhD. *(404) Job Not Found: What Workforce Training Can't Fix for Black Atlantans in the Age of AI,* Data & Society Research Institute, 2026. https://doi.org/10.69985/OOTF6452.

Appendix

"AI Can't Do Nothing With Us!": Inside the Classrooms at a Local Workforce Training Program [An Ethnographic Snapshot]

It's a bright June morning when I return to City of Refuge, one of Atlanta's best-known workforce training hubs, tucked in the Westside. The mood in the cybersecurity classroom operated by training and staffing firm NPursuit Career Partners is warm and welcoming. JW, the teacher's assistant (TA), who remembered me from my visit during 404 Day back in April, greets me with a wide smile and a generous offer: "Coffee, water, a muffin?" I smile back and decline, waving my water bottle to indicate that I'm all right, and look for a seat in the back of the classroom so as not to disrupt the class in session.

Once seated, I scan the room and take in the scene. Roughly 20 adult learners sit with laptops open in front of me with fingers poised for the day's Python lesson: "Understanding Input, Process, and Output." What I see is a rare sight in tech spaces: a room where Black students make up the overwhelming majority (17 in total), alongside two Latinx students and one white student. Both the instructor and the TA are Black as well, creating a learning environment shaped by and for the communities most often excluded from the tech pipeline.

The instructor, Mr. Jerry, wears a white polo, light-wash jeans, and sneakers. He brings both energy and levity to the material. "What do you know about algebra?" he asks. "X equals Y," one student calls out. "That's it," another says, triggering a round of chuckles. Mr. Jerry uses the moment to break down programming logic, walking the class through how algebraic thinking connects to writing code.

In the row ahead of me, a woman turns around and greets me with a warm smile and an outstretched hand. "Hey, are you a new student? I'm Karen." I tell her I'm just observing, and she nods, welcoming me in without hesitation.

The class is lively and responsive. "What's Boolean?" Mr. Jerry asks. "True or False!" they exclaim. "Y'all getting too smart," he says with a grin. Someone from the front jokes, "AI can't do nothing with us!" and the room erupts in laughter. What I witness is part classroom and part community, a learning space where students feel empowered to ask questions, joke around, and support each other.

During a short break, Karen, who first greeted me, shares her story. She's been working since 2008 and pivoted to cybersecurity during the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 after having worked for a travel management company for most of the 2000s. A first-generation college student, she re-enrolled in school in 2021 and recently finished her degree at Atlanta Technical College. She juggled

her studies while caregiving for her niece, who had been diagnosed with lymphoma, and praises the empathy and flexibility she received from her school's director, who allowed her to do some work remotely to complete the degree. Now, she's here at City of Refuge's Tech Transformation Academy, training to become a cybersecurity analyst. "I want to be able to assist a company in getting their cybersecurity under control," she tells me. "The human aspect of cybersecurity is still our biggest vulnerability."

When I ask her about AI, she lights up. "I love AI! Sometimes there's something you want to say, but you just need it to be zhuzhed up." Karen doesn't fear displacement and instead chooses to remain optimistic: "We've had more than one speaker say that AI will only replace you if you don't want to embrace it. No matter how much we train it to be human, it will never be human. Like when you have a family issue and your manager understands what that's like. It's not about being lazy or unfocused. It's just life." She pauses before adding, "I never want to work at a company that is so work-focused that it doesn't understand humans."

NPursuit's 32-week cybersecurity program at City of Refuge blends technical instruction with hands-on, human-centered support. It starts with professional development, followed by Linux, Network+, and Python courses. Wednesdays bring guest speakers and site visits to companies like Cox and the Federal Reserve. It is a Tuesday so today's lesson will be followed by lab time, where students tackle case study assignments due later in the week. At the end of the break, Mr. Jerry jokes, "Let me call Ms. Jahari, y'all britches getting too tight," before pivoting into the next part of the day: how to use the print () function to display multiple items in Python.

"They just all finished and got certified in Networking Plus, CompTIA Net Plus, which is a very, very, difficult exam to do. And we had a 97 percent certification rate! Probably one of the highest in the Atlanta area, so almost double the national average. I'm just so, so, so, so, so proud of them!" said Jahari Soward, managing director and CEO of NPursuit Career Partners, as we spoke in her office. When I inquired about what she thinks contributed to the cohort's success, she shared, "I think it's a variety of things. I think the way in which we taught the instruction. Certainly, the wraparound support, the quality of the instruction. We are certified by CompTIA to teach it." "Is that not normal?" I ask. "Well, you know, a lot of programs out here have it, but that doesn't mean that they're certified and authorized to teach it," Soward explained.

Next, I inquire about students like Karen who went through a two-year cybersecurity program at Atlanta Technical College, but didn't graduate with the same certification. Soward explains that unlike the program at NPursuit, most institutions don't pay for certification exams. "So they can do the training, but then the certification exam is on you," she said. She goes on to elaborate on the human-centered wraparound support the program offers that distinguishes it from formal education institutions:

> We do the training, we pay for the certification exam, and all of the prep materials to help you get ready for the exam. We try to make sure that we create programs that are comprehensive, inclusive, that we recognize barriers within your home or what's going on. For some of them, we've paid for child care so you can have more time to study. So whatever it takes. What are the barriers that exist that we can support?

While some of Atlanta's top employers have reviewed and advised on the curriculum — and have indeed hired program alumni — Soward says that there are no formal hiring guarantees or job funnels in place for participants at the end of the program. I have found this to be standard among the programs I encountered during this study. NPursuit's cybersecurity program instead emphasizes strong certification outcomes, personalized job search coaching, and confidence-building through exposure to real-world tech environments. Participants work closely with a job specialist and a support services staff member over the eight to nine-month program duration to address employment barriers and build workforce readiness.

Despite the lack of stipends or wages, the program offers significant in-kind value: It is tuition-free, with an estimated value of $15,000 per participant, and is backed by a partnership with Atlanta Technical College, which grants continuing education units. Soward says that the program also offers a free summer camp for participants' children as well as touchpoints that aim to create meaningful industry connections, such as passes to major tech events like Atlanta Tech Week and AfroTech (sometimes) as well as membership into the Cloud Security Alliance.

Later, I stepped into the classroom of a different, shorter-term program where in addition to general job readiness training, students were introduced to AI tools to aid them as they pivoted careers. The session I observed was "Personal Branding" and covered topics such as how to create an online profile, how to audit your own strengths, and how to align your goals with your public-facing profile. One student, an aspiring artist and entrepreneur, shares that she's creating an Instagram account, a website, and business cards to promote her sip-and-paint events. April, the instructor, encourages the student to weave her creativity into her résumé and online presence. "I didn't know you were an artist," she says. "You didn't mention that when we worked on your resume."

This class of 18 is also predominantly Black, with students ranging from their early 20s to their 50s. Many are writing new chapters and crafting new personal brands for themselves. "Right now, a lot of us are rebuilding from scratch," said one student. Another, a former nurse and hospitality worker, says that she is unsure how to pivot. But they're all here, learning how to brand themselves.

Today they are preparing their résumés ahead of Thursday's LinkedIn session where they'll use an AI tool to generate professional headshots. A nonprofit called Inspiredu will visit tomorrow to teach digital navigation skills with the opportunity for students to earn a device of their own.

As I head out for the day, I see a rep from Mavis Tires arrive at City of Refuge to promote job opportunities. They aren't tech jobs, but they're steady work. And for many, *that's* the draw.

Methodology

As a researcher at Data & Society, my goal is to take the strands of information about labor, race, and technology rooted at the forefront of our minds and braid them into rows of stories about the human condition that go straight back to the kitchen, or heart of the American historical imaginary[52]. This, I believe, leads to the Southern neck of the woods. As a cultural anthropologist, the crops of these conceptual cornrows are oiled with thick descriptions, or detailed human accounts, that speak to the depth and complexity of the social implications of emerging technologies like AI.

The methodological approach for this study foregrounded the lived experiences and institutional perspectives of primarily Black workers in metro Atlanta's current sociotechnical landscape while situating those experiences within the broader structural and institutional forces that continue to shape the relationship between labor, race, and technology in the United States. I paid particular attention to the asymmetries of power and access that shape labor conditions and imperatives to probe into the question of what it means to be perceived as skilled in today's increasingly AI-driven labor market.

Reflexive fieldnotes and iterative analysis were integral to the research process, allowing for emergent themes to guide ongoing inquiry in ways that responded to the rapidly evolving media and policy environment wherein digital skilling and workforce development have remained high-profile topics of public and institutional interest.

Research design and planning for this project formally began in January 2025. Fieldwork was conducted over a six-month period, from February to August 2025. Formal fieldwork was conducted across ten distinct sites that included public institutions, private enterprises, nonprofit initiatives, career- and technology-oriented conferences, and community-based training programs. The intensity of engagement varied by site, with visits ranging from one to three per location, allowing for both a broad contextual understanding and, in select cases, a deeper relational immersion. Even though this study was not intended to be a comprehensive investigation of every workforce development initiative in Atlanta as it relates to the impact of AI on the career outcomes of workers, each site offered a unique window into how emerging trends in labor are being negotiated on the ground in Georgia.

The recruitment strategy for this study highlights the importance of building trust and rapport through sustained participant observation. By immersing myself in the everyday settings where workforce development efforts take place — particularly those serving Black workers and underserved communities, including training programs, community events, job fairs, and organizational meetings — I was able to develop meaningful relationships rooted in presence, familiarity, and mutual respect with potential participants. This is a strategy that works especially

well in relationship-driven cities like Atlanta, where the adage "your network is your net worth" is a lived reality. Most participants for this study were recruited in person through informal conversations and interactions during formal site visits or in serendipitous everyday encounters at times when I was technically off the clock. This speaks to the fluid nature of immersive ethnography where there is often crossover between work and life for researchers like myself who choose to study topics as ubiquitous as AI or the labor market, let alone both. Other participants joined the study through snowball sampling, having been referred by peers, colleagues, or friends, while a smaller subset was recruited through cold outreach via email. Overall, this combination of recruitment strategies reinforces the importance of grounded, relational methods in labor research.

Formal data collection also involved 34 semi-structured interviews conducted both in person and virtually, based on the preference of each participant. Interviews ranged in length from 15 to 90 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and securely transcribed through a transcription platform then manually coded and analyzed by the author. Research participants included a diverse array of stakeholders, such as training program participants, educators, employers, community leaders, policy makers, government officials, and program managers, as well as workers across different sectors and career stages. This allowed for a multi-perspective analysis of the state's digital skilling infrastructure. To protect the privacy of research participants, identifying details were redacted and interlocutors who opted to participate anonymously were assigned pseudonyms where appropriate.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I analyzed relevant policy documents, curriculum materials, and industry reports to trace how digital skills training initiatives are being designed and implemented. As a mixed-methods researcher, I agree with researchers Vidushi Marda and Shivangi Narayan who claim, "The uncritical and positivist use of quantitative methods does not allow for consideration of context, of why outcomes occur or how they came to be" (2021).[53] They also note that quantitative methods, when used toward positivist ends, do not enable the questioning of power hierarchies and asymmetries. Additional secondary research across the disciplines of anthropology, critical identity studies, education, history, urban studies, sociology, and technology provided critical insight into how intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, age, ability, and geography systemically shape both access and opportunity in the United States. My ethnographic methods were supplemented by ongoing engagement with subject matter experts, advocates, and scholars. I additionally solicited external feedback during the research process, including peer review of drafts and participant review of excerpts, to ensure analytical rigor and relevance as well as responsibility to those I am in community with as a resident of the Atlanta metropolitan area.

References

Abril, Danielle. "Employers list 'AI literacy' as a New Job Skill. What does that mean?" *The Washington Post*, 2 Sept. 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/08/30/job-skills-ai-literacy/.

American Psychological Association. "Majority of US Workers Say Job Security Has Significant Impact on Their Stress." *American Psychological Association*, July 2025, https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2025.

Association of National Advertisers. "ANA Report Shows Ethnic Diversity Among Marketers Declining." *Association of National Advertisers*, 24 Feb. 2024, https://www.ana.net/content/show/id/pr-2024-02-diversity-report."

Atlanta Telephone History. "Georgia Telephone History." *Atlanta Telephone History*. http://atlantatelephonehistory.org/atlanta:georgia.

Bozarth, Kendra, et al. "Black Women Best: The Framework We Need for an Equitable Economy." *Roosevelt Institute*, SepT. 2020, https://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RI_Black-Women-Best_IssueBrief-202009.pdf.

Brynjolfsson, Erik, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen. "Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence." *Stanford Digital Economy Lab*. https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publications/canaries-in-the-coal-mine/.

Camardelle, Alex, and Jarryd Bethea. "Building a Beloved Economy: A Baseline and Framework for Building Black Wealth in Atlanta." *Kindred Futures,* 2023, https://kindredfutures.org/building-a-beloved-economy/.

Childers, Chandra. "Rooted in Racism and Economic Exploitation: The Failed Southern economic Development Model." *Economic Policy Institute,* 2023, https://www.epi.org/publication/rooted-in-racism/.

Dunietz, Jessie. "How the 404 Error Created the World Wide Web." *Popular Mechanics,* 2019, https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/a24091/404-error-world-wide-web/.

Georgia Department of Economic Development. "Workforce & Education." *Georgia USA*, n.d., https://georgia.org/competitive-advantages/workforce-education#block2.

Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 1982.

Goldstone, Brian. *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*. Crown, 2025.

Greene, Daniel. *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope*, MIT Press, 2021. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6534505.

Guynn, Jessica, and Nicquel Terry Ellis. "Goodbye, Silicon Valley, hello, Atlanta: Black Entrepreneurs Part of New Migration to South." *USA Today,* 10 Mar. 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/03/10/bye-silicon-valley-black-entrepreneurs-part-new-migration-atlanta/2982120002/.

Harris, N.E. "The Formal Opening." *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 Oct. 1888.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Perspectives on Gender*. Routledge, 2008.

IBM. "2025 CEO Study: 5 Mindshifts to Supercharge Business Growth." *IBM,* 2025. https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/en-us/c-suite-study/ceo.

Karki, Lara, et al. "A Window into DataWorks: Developing an Integrated Work-Training Curriculum for Novice Adults." *Proceedings of SIGCSE TS*, 26 Feb – 1 Mar. 2025.

Keating, Larry. *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion.* Temple UP, 2010.

Kinder, Molly, et al. "Generative AI, the American worker, and the future of work | Brookings." *Brookings Institution*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/generative-ai-the-american-worker-and-the-future-of-work/.

Levanon, Gad, et al. 2025. *No Country for Young Grads*. The Burning Glass Institute, 2025, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6197797102be715f55c0e0a1/t/6889055d25352c5b3f28c202/1753810269213/No+Country+for+Young+Grads+V_Final7.29.25+%281%29.pdf.

Lewis, Greg, and Manas Mohapatra. "The Boom in AI Literacy Skills: Who's Learning What." *LinkedIn Talent Blog,* 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/learning-and-development/boom-in-ai-literacy-skills.

Lowe, Nichola. *Putting Skill to Work: How to Create Good Jobs in Uncertain Times.* MIT Press, 2021. *ProQuest Ebook Central.*

Marda, Vidushi, and Shivangi Narayan. "On the Importance of Ethnographic Methods in AI Research." *Nature Machine Intelligence,* 2021. https://nature.com/articles/s42256-021-00323-0.epdf?sharing_

Martinez, Gracie, and Jeffrey S. Passel. "Facts About the US Black Population." *Pew Research Center,* 2025. https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/.

McElroy, Neil H. "Brand Men Memo." *Procter & Gamble*, 13 May 1931, https://www.bringthedonuts.com/media/neil-mcelroy-brand-memo-1931.pdf.

"McGee, Ebony Omotola, et al. Fostering Tomorrow's Black STEM Entrepreneurs: Insights from an Innovative STEM Program Promoting Equity-Centered Entrepreneurship. Paper presented at *Collaborative Network for Engineering & Computing Diversity (CoNECD)*, 9 Feb. 2025.

Monroe-White, Thema. "Emancipatory Data Science: A Liberatory Framework for Mitigating Data Harms and Fostering Social Transformation." *Proceedings of the 2021 Computers and People Research Conference*, ACM, 2021, pp. 23-30, doi.org/10.1145/3458026.3462161.

Neff, Gina. *Venture Labor : Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*, MIT Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central.*

Olugbemiga, Ayobami. 2020. "New NSC Analysis Finds Significant Digital Skills Gaps for Workers Across Industries, With Workers of Color Most Likely to Have Limited or No Digital Skills." *National Skills Coalition,* 2020, https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/press-releases/new-nsc-analysis-finds-significant-digital-skills-gaps-for-workers-across-industries-with-workers-of-color-most-likely-to-have-limited-or-no-digital-skills-2/.

Raman, Aneesh. "LinkedIn Executive: A.I. Is Coming for Entry-Level Jobs." *The New York Times*, 19 May 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/19/opinion/linkedin-ai-entry-level-jobs.html?searchResultPosition=1

Schroeder, Pete. "Policy uncertainty, geopolitical risk are top stability concerns in latest Fed survey." *Reuters*, 7 Nov. 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/policy-uncertainty-geopolitical-risk-are-top-stability-concerns-latest-fed-2025-11-07/.

The Project on Workforce Team. "The Workforce Almanac Report: A System-Level View of US Workforce Training Providers." *Harvard Project on Workforce*, 2023, https://www.pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/workforce-almanac-2023.

The White House. "America's AI Action Plan." *The White House*, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf.

The White House. "Restriction on Entry of Certain Nonimmigrant Workers." *The White House*, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/restriction-on-entry-of-certain-nonimmigrant-workers/.

US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Table A-2. Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm.

US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Union Members in Georgia – 2024." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 2025, https://www.bls.gov/regions/southeast/news-release/unionmembers_georgia.htm.

US Census Bureau and US Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2025. "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates." *Federal Reserve Bank of New York*, 2025, https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market/#--:explore:unemployment.

Vipra, Jai. "Upskilling, Reskilling, Deskilling: India's Semiconductor Dreams and The Need to Reframe Labor Policy." *Center for the Advanced Study of India, 2025,* https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/jai-vipra.

World Economic Forum. *The Future of Jobs Report 2023*. World Economic Forum, 2023, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2023.pdf.

Young, Meg, et al, *Gear Shift: Driving Change in Public Sector Technology through Community Input*, Data & Society Research Institute, June 2025. doi: 10.69985/JPTW3751

Endnotes

1 Place branding is the long-term, strategic effort to create a place's identity, image, and reputation.

2 High-quality employment in this context is a job that offers a living wage, benefits, safe working conditions, a sense of dignity, and opportunities for advancement.

3 World Economic Forum. 2023. "Future of Jobs Report 2023." World Economic Forum. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2023.pdf.

4 Olugbemiga, Ayobami. 2020. "New NSC Analysis Finds Significant Digital Skills Gaps for Workers Across Industries, With Workers of Color Most Likely to Have Limited or No Digital Skills." National Skills Coalition. https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/press-releases/new-nsc-analysis-finds-significant-digital-skills-gaps-for-workers-across-industries-with-workers-of-color-most-likely-to-have-limited-or-no-digital-skills-2/.

5 Greene, Daniel. The Promise of Access : Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope, MIT Press, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6534505.

6 Vipra, Jai. 2025. "Upskilling, Reskilling, Deskilling: India's Semiconductor Dreams and the Need to Reframe Labor Policy." Center for the Advanced Study of India. https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/jai-vipra.

7 These remarks by Nathaniel Edwin (N.E.) Harris were printed in the October 6, 1888, edition of *Atlanta Constitution* to mark the formal opening of the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech). Harris, a state representative from Macon, led the legislative campaign to establish the school.

8 Georgia USA. n.d. "Workforce & Education." Georgia Department of Economic Development. https://georgia.org/competitive-advantages/workforce-education#block2.

9 Martinez, Gracie, and Jeffrey S. Passel. 2025. "Facts About the U.S. Black Population." Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/.

10 Guynn, Jessica, and Nicquel Terry Ellis. 2019. "Goodbye, Silicon Valley, hello, Atlanta: Black entrepreneurs part of new migration to South." USA Today. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/03/10/bye-silicon-valley-black-entrepreneurs-part-new-migration-atlanta/2982120002/.

11 The pit of a peach is its protective inner layer that encloses and safeguards the seed until it can grow.

12 Camardelle, Alex, and Jarryd Bethea. 2023. "Building a Beloved Economy: A Baseline and Framework for Building Black Wealth in Atlanta." Kindred Futures. https://kindredfutures.org/building-a-beloved-economy/.

13 Childers, Chandra. 2023. "Rooted in racism and economic exploitation: The failed Southern economic development model." Economic Policy Institute. https://www.epi.org/publication/rooted-in-racism/.

14 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2025. "Union Members in Georgia – 2024." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/regions/southeast/news-release/unionmembers_georgia.htm.

15 Digital skilling is defined as the process of learning and developing digital skills.

16 Schroeder, Pete. "Policy uncertainty, geopolitical risk are top stability concerns in latest Fed survey." Reuters, 7 November 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/policy-uncertainty-geopolitical-risk-are-top-stability-concerns-latest-fed-2025-11-07/.

17 American Psychological Association. "Majority of U.S. workers say job security has significant impact on their stress." American Psychological Association, July 2025, https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2025.

18 IBM. 2025. "2025 CEO Study: 5 Mindshifts to supercharge business growth." IBM. https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/en-us/c-suite-study/ceo.

19 The White House. 2025. "America's AI Action Plan." The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf.

20 Abril, Danielle. 2025. "Employers list 'AI literacy' as a new job skill. What does that mean?" The Washington Post, September 2, 2025. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/08/30/job-skills-ai-literacy/.

21 Lewis, Greg, and Manas Mohapatra. 2024. "The Boom in AI Literacy Skills: Who's Learning What." LinkedIn Talent Blog. https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/learning-and-development/boom-in-ai-literacy-skills.

22 Brand Management is the foundation of modern Product Management. While Brand Management focuses on emotional connection and market perception, Product Management expanded McElroy's concept of the "Brand Man" to include the technical development, user experience (UX), and functional aspects of a product.

23 McElroy, Neil H. "Brand Men Memo." Procter & Gamble, 13 May 1931, https://www.bringthedonuts.com/media/neil-mcelroy-brand-memo-1931.pdf.

24 Atlanta Telephone History. n.d. "Georgia Telephone History." Atlanta Telephone History. http://atlantatelephonehistory.org/atlanta:georgia.

25 Dunietz, Jessie. 2019. "How the 404 Error Created the World Wide Web." Popular Mechanics. https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/a24091/404-error-world-wide-web/.

26 Founded in 2019 by engineer and entrepreneur Justin E. Samuels, Render promotes itself as "the premier continuing education conference for technology professionals." With a key area of focus on AI across all tracks and workshops, RenderATL 2025 welcomed 8,000 badge holders as the flagship event of Atlanta Tech Week which itself welcomed 15,000 participants.

27 Keating, Larry. 2010. Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

28 Other names in the mix at one point or another in time have been "Silicon Peach" and "Silicon Orchard." "Silicon South" is the latest in this trend of tech-oriented place-marketing slogans manufactured by city boosters. It has been popularized by influential entities such as Atlanta Tech Week and RenderATL.

29 Pseudonyms are used for all interviewee names, unless otherwise expressed through the use of an interviewee's full name and role. Some details are obscured to preserve their anonymity.

30 E-Verify is a system that helps employers electronically confirm that an employee is legally authorized to work in the United States. For businesses operating in Georgia, using E-Verify is a state-level requirement for obtaining a business license or professional license.

31 The White House. 2025. "Restriction on Entry of Certain Nonimmigrant Workers – The White House." The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/restriction-on-entry-of-certain-nonimmigrant-workers/.

32 Goffman, Erving. 1982. Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior. New York City: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

33 The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education is the nation's most widely used framework for categorizing US higher education institutions. Only institutions with the highest level of research spending and doctorate production are designated as "Carnegie Research (R1) Institutions."

34 Association of National Advertisers. "ANA Report Shows Ethnic Diversity Among Marketers Declining." Association of National Advertisers, 24 February 2024, https://www.ana.net/content/show/id/pr-2024-02-diversity-report.

35 Laila offered these as examples of additional ways she engages with AI in her everyday life.

36 Brynjolfsson, Erik, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen. 2025. "Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence." Stanford Digital Economy Lab. https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publications/canaries-in-the-coal-mine/; Levanon, Gad, Matt Sigelman, Mariano Mamertino, Meis de Zeeuw, and Gwynn Guilford. 2025. "No Country for Young Grads." The Burning Glass Institute. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6197797102be715f55c0e0a1/t/6889055d-25352c5b3f28c202/1753810269213/No+Country+for+Young+Grads+V_Final7.29.25+%281%29.pdf; Raman, Aneesh. 2025. "Opinion | LinkedIn Executive: A.I. Is Coming for Entry-Level Jobs." *The New York Times*, May 19, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/19/opinion/linkedin-ai-entry-level-jobs.html?searchResultPosition=1.

37 Levanon, Gad, Matt Sigelman, Mariano Mamertino, Meis de Zeeuw, and Gwynn Guilford. 2025. "No Country for Young Grads." The Burning Glass Institute.

38 U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2025. "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates - FEDERAL RESERVE BANK of NEW YORK." Federal Reserve Bank of New York. https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market/#--:explore:unemployment.

39 The Project on Workforce Team. 2023. "The Workforce Almanac Report: A System-Level View of U.S. Workforce Training Providers." Harvard Project on Workforce. https://www.pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/workforce-almanac-2023.

40 The section title draws inspiration from Ntozake Shange's groundbreaking choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. First published and produced in 1975, the work foregrounds the voices of seven women navigating the intersecting violences of racism and sexism. Through their stories Shange draws attention to the constraints, choices, and forms of possibility available to women of color. These themes are relevant to the overarching sociocultural contexts examined in this study.

41 McGee, Ebony Omotola, et al. Fostering Tomorrow's Black STEM Entrepreneurs: Insights from an Innovative STEM Program Promoting Equity-Centered Entrepreneurship. Conference Paper. Paper presented at 2025 Collaborative Network for Engineering & Computing Diversity (CoNECD), 9 February 2025.

42 Monroe-White, Thema. "Emancipatory Data Science: A Liberatory Framework for Mitigating Data Harms and Fostering Social Transformation." SIGMIS-CPR '21: Proceedings of the 2021 Computers and People Research Conference, 2021, pp. 23-30. Association for Computing Machinery, https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3458026.3462161.

43 Hill Collins, Patricia. 2008. Black Feminist Thought: Perspectives on Gender. London: Routledge.

44 Neff, Gina. Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries, MIT Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3339426.

45 Bozarth, Kendra, et al. "Black Women Best: The Framework We Need for an Equitable Economy." Roosevelt Institute, September 2020, https://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RI_Black-Women-Best_IssueBrief-202009.pdf.

46 Kinder, Molly, Xavier de Souza Briggs, Mark Muro, and Sifan Liu. 2024. "Generative AI, the American worker, and the future of work | Brookings." Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/

articles/generative-ai-the-american-worker-and-the-future-of-work/.

47 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2025. "Table A-2. Employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age - 2025 M07 Results." Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm.

48 Lowe, Nichola. 2021. *Putting Skill to Work: How to Create Good Jobs in Uncertain Times*. MIT Press. ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 16.

49 Goldstone, Brian. 2025. *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*. New York City: Crown, p. xxi.

50 Karki, Lara, Dana Priest, James G. DuBose, Zajerria Godfrey, Annabel Rothschild, Ben R. Shapiro, and Betsy DiSalvo. 2025. "A Window into DataWorks: Developing an Integrated Work-Training Curriculum for Novice Adults." SIGCSE TS, no. February 26-March 1.

51 Meg Young, Sarah Fox, Vinhcent Le, and Oscar J. Romero Jr., Gear Shift: Driving Change in Public Sector Technology through Community Input, Data & Society Research Institute, June 2025. DOI: 10.69985/JPTW3751

52 Here I refer to the collective, mythologized vision of the past that shapes U.S. national identity.

53 Marda, Vidushi, and Shivangi Narayan. 2021. "On the importance of ethnographic methods in AI research." Nature. https://www.nature.com/articles/s42256-021-00323-0.epdf?sharing_token=fESLlx-hYUu2Qa9D7439HutRgN0jAjWel9jnR3ZoT-v0P3PtSZInLIAu4IimNKg2qPHQPzeMgix-vZL2wnzMi4GiZSII5HAFPaKRgcZYh-KIcBtKDDSVRBwOjMT2jmi6DnTS8_La1OnfvidzaIBy9TacIWiyjbEtgp8gDal0yddiKsw%3D.

Data & Society is an independent nonprofit research and policy institute, studying the social implications of data-centric technologies and automation. We recognize that the same innovative technologies that may benefit society can also be abused to invade privacy, provide new tools of discrimination, foreclose opportunity and harm individuals and communities. We believe that technology policy must be grounded in empirical evidence, and serve the public.

www.datasociety.net

@datasociety

Cover Elly Rodgers and layout by Gloria Mendoza
February 2026