

# The Real AI Divide Isn't Intelligence. It's Bandwidth.

*by Abby Buchanan*

There's a growing assumption that AI will divide people based on intelligence—who knows how to use it, who understands it, who can keep up.

But that framing misses something more fundamental.

Much of modern work isn't thinking—it's translating thinking into structured formats that systems can recognize.

The real divide isn't intelligence. It's bandwidth.

Not everyone is moving through their day with the same amount of cognitive or emotional margin. Some people have space—time to think, to experiment, to refine their approach. Others are moving through systems in a constant state of pressure.

AI systems, in theory, reduce effort. They summarize, organize, suggest, and generate. They also introduce new decisions and new layers of interaction. Someone with time and cognitive space can explore what a tool can do. Over time, that compounds. But someone without that margin encounters something very different.

A new tool isn't an opportunity—it's another demand. And in that context, even helpful tools can feel like friction. So adoption doesn't track with intelligence. It tracks with available capacity.

Bandwidth also isn't distributed randomly. It's shaped by circumstance—economic pressure, job instability, caregiving demands, and the ongoing cognitive load of navigating systems that weren't designed with you in mind.

When those conditions are disrupted, the impact isn't just financial. It's cognitive. The loss of stability increases stress, reduces available bandwidth, and makes it harder to engage with the very tools that might help navigate that transition.

There's a feedback loop here. The people who could most benefit from AI-supported tools may be the least resourced to adopt them quickly or effectively.

The question isn't just whether AI makes people more productive. It's whether it expands participation—whether more people are able to contribute, think, and work in ways that were previously blocked by cognitive or structural friction.

The future of AI isn't just about what the technology can do. It's about who is able to use it—and under what conditions. And whether those conditions are expanding, or narrowing, who gets to participate.