The Opportunity Gap: Who Actually Benefits from AI

by Abby Buchanan

AI is often described as a productivity tool.

But what matters just as much is how unevenly that productivity turns into opportunity.

It's easy to frame this as a skills gap. Some people know how to use these tools, and others don't.

That's part of it, but it's not really the thing I keep noticing.

What I'm seeing is something closer to an opportunity gap.

Not everyone is encountering this technology from the same starting point. Some people have time, stability, and enough room to experiment. They can explore tools slowly, refine how they use them, and gradually turn them into leverage.

Others are already navigating pressure—financial stress, unstable work, caregiving demands, burnout, systems that already require a huge amount of effort just to function inside of them.

In those conditions, a new tool doesn't necessarily feel like opportunity.

Sometimes it just feels like one more thing to figure out.

That difference compounds quickly.

The people who are able to engage early start building fluency. They learn how to move through systems faster, communicate more efficiently, produce more output, adapt more quickly to shifting expectations.

Over time, that advantage accelerates.

Meanwhile, people with less margin may adopt these tools more slowly—or not at all—not because they lack intelligence, but because the cost of engagement is higher.

There’s a feedback loop in that.

Reduced bandwidth makes it harder to adopt new tools. Slower adoption makes it harder to access new opportunities. That loss of opportunity creates more pressure, which further reduces bandwidth.

The gap widens through conditions, not ability.

What makes this moment complicated is that the same tools that can widen that gap also have the potential to narrow it.

AI can function almost like a cognitive prosthetic.

It can help people structure thinking, draft communication, navigate unfamiliar systems, organize information, translate ideas into formats that are more easily recognized. It can help with job searches, resumes, planning, applications—all the things that become strangely difficult under stress or cognitive overload.

And for someone who doesn’t already have access to institutional fluency—or to networks that quietly open doors—that kind of support can matter a lot.

It can make certain pathways feel more reachable.

But that outcome isn’t automatic.

If these tools mostly amplify the output of people who are already positioned to move quickly—people with time, stability, access, confidence—then the result isn’t just increased productivity.

It’s increased divergence.

And I don’t think we fully understand yet how quickly that compounds.

There’s another layer to this too.

As AI reduces effort in some areas, it creates a different kind of resource: time, cognitive space, capacity.

But that capacity doesn’t distribute evenly—and it isn’t always retained by the person doing the work.

In many systems, efficiency gains get absorbed upstream. They become higher expectations, faster turnaround times, increased scope, more responsiveness, more output.

The individual doesn't necessarily experience that as relief.

It just becomes the new baseline.

I think that's part of the tension underneath a lot of conversations about AI right now.

Not just what the tools can do.

But who actually gets to benefit from the bandwidth they create.

AI, in some ways, represents an enormous amount of power placed into systems without much shared agreement about how that power should be distributed. The tools are moving quickly. Expectations around them are still forming. And the conditions under which people are being asked to engage with them vary enormously.

So the question isn't only what these tools are capable of.

It's who is actually able to use them in ways that meaningfully change their trajectory.

And whether the systems around them are designed to support that—or quietly but significantly reinforce the gaps that already exist.