# Forward deployed careers: a feature in The Economic Times on the future of professional work in the age of AI

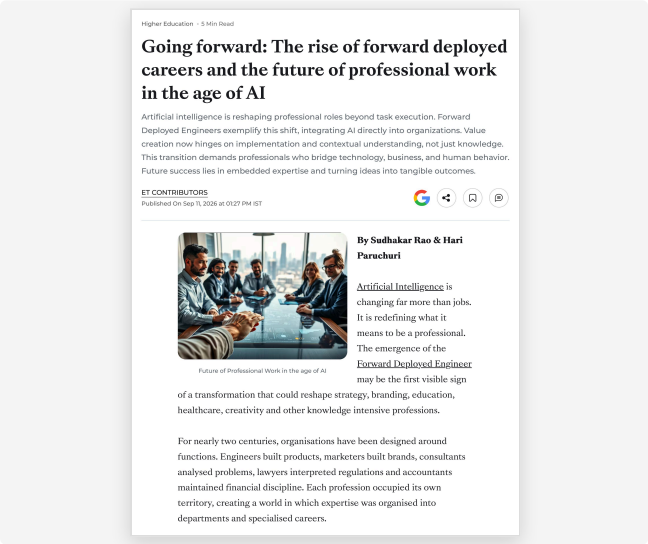
Co-authored, bylined opinion feature in ETEducation, The Economic Times' education vertical. Higher Education section, published 11 September 2026.

| 5 min | ~1,100 | 4 | Bylined |
|---|---|---|---|
| READ, AS LABELLED | WORDS | SHIFTS, ONE GRAPHIC | BOTH AUTHORS NAMED |

## THE PIECE

### Going forward: The rise of forward deployed careers and the future of professional work in the age of AI

ETEducation, The Economic Times · ET Contributors · 11 Sep 2026



Higher Education · 5 Min Read

**Going forward: The rise of forward deployed careers and the future of professional work in the age of AI**

Artificial intelligence is reshaping professional roles beyond task execution. Forward Deployed Engineers exemplify this shift, integrating AI directly into organizations. Value creation now hinges on implementation and contextual understanding, not just knowledge. This transition demands professionals who bridge technology, business, and human behavior. Future success lies in embedded expertise and turning ideas into tangible outcomes.

ET CONTRIBUTORS
Published On Sep 11, 2026 at 01:27 PM IST



Future of Professional Work in the age of AI

By Sudhakar Rao & Hari Paruchuri

Artificial Intelligence is changing far more than jobs. It is redefining what it means to be a professional. The emergence of the Forward Deployed Engineer may be the first visible sign of a transformation that could reshape strategy, branding, education, healthcare, creativity and other knowledge intensive professions.

For nearly two centuries, organisations have been designed around functions. Engineers built products, marketers built brands, consultants analysed problems, lawyers interpreted regulations and accountants maintained financial discipline. Each profession occupied its own territory, creating a world in which expertise was organised into departments and specialised careers.

Takes one visible fact, the rise of the Forward Deployed Engineer who works inside the customer's organisation until the outcome lands, and reads it as the first sign of a wider change in what a professional is. For two centuries expertise was organised by function. AI is making functional expertise abundant; what stays scarce is context, implementation and accountability for results.

## THE ARGUMENT, IN THREE MOVES

**Adoption is outrunning value.** Enterprise generative-AI spend rose from about US$11.5 billion in 2024 to US$37 billion in 2025 (as cited), yet MIT's State of AI in Business 2025 found around 5% of pilots produced measurable impact and McKinsey's 2026 survey has 70% of employees ready against 11% of organisations realising benefits.

**The premium moves from functional to embedded expertise.** The scarce resource is no longer intelligence; it is implementation. This names a new class of work, Forward Deployed Careers, defined by proximity to the problem and accountability for the outcome rather than by discipline.

**Every knowledge profession follows.** Consulting moves from diagnosis to implementation, branding from communication to organisational behaviour, creative work from campaigns to continuous interpretation, universities from awarding degrees to producing graduates who can create value.

> *"The Knowledge Economy rewarded specialists. The AI economy appears poised to reward integrators."*

What the piece shows: a thought-leadership method at feature length. One observed phenomenon, a name for what it signals, three cited figures that make the gap undeniable, a four-part framework the reader can carry away (redrawn on the last sheet), consequences for the reader's own profession, and a close that reclaims a tired phrase ("going forward") as the direction professional value is moving: closer to customers, execution and accountability.

**Role: co-author.** Argument, structure and writing under a joint byline. The article as published is reproduced on the next sheet; the graphic that ran with it is redrawn on the third.

Higher Education · 5 Min Read

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# THE FOUR KEY SHIFTS IN THE AGE OF AI

From Functional Expertise to Forward Deployed Careers

## 1 THE SHIFT IN AI ADOPTION: ACTIVITY VS IMPACT

| AI ADOPTION REALITY | WHAT IT TELLS US |
|---|---|
| Enterprise generative AI spending increased from ~US$11.5B in 2024 to US$37B in 2025 | Organisations are investing aggressively in AI capabilities |
| MIT's State of AI in Business 2025 found that only ~5% of AI pilots generated measurable business impact | Most AI initiatives fail to move beyond experimentation |
| McKinsey's Global AI Survey (2026) reports that while 70% of employees are ready to use AI, only 11% of organisations are realising business benefits | Adoption is growing much faster than value creation |

## 2 FROM FUNCTIONAL EXPERTISE TO EMBEDDED EXPERTISE

| FUNCTIONAL EXPERTISE (OLD MODEL) | EMBEDDED EXPERTISE (NEW MODEL) |
|---|---|
| Works outside the organisation | Works alongside the organisation |
| Focuses on completing projects | Focuses on solving business problems |
| Delivers recommendations or outputs | Delivers implementation and outcomes |
| Limited engagement | Stays through implementation |
| Measures success through deliverables | Measures success through business impact |

## 3 THE EVOLUTION OF VALUE CREATION

| ERA | PRIMARY ASSET | COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE | FOCUS OF VALUE CREATION | KEY ENABLER |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Industrial economy | Labour | Productivity | Efficiency and scale of output | Physical capital and machinery |
| Knowledge economy | Expertise | Information | Quality of insights and knowledge | Human intellect and education |
| AI economy | Embedded expertise | Execution | Real-world outcomes and impact | Context, integration and accountability |

## 4 THE SHIFT IN PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND VALUE

| FROM (TRADITIONAL MODEL) | | TO (FORWARD DEPLOYED MODEL) |
|---|---|---|
| Specialists in silos | → | Cross-functional integrators |
| Provide advice and insights | → | Deliver implementation and outcomes |
| Project-based engagements | → | Embedded, continuous partnerships |
| Success measured by outputs | → | Success measured by business impact |

**THE CENTRAL TRUTH**

AI is not just changing jobs. It is changing how expertise creates value. The future belongs to professionals who are embedded, accountable and relentless about outcomes.

**THE FUTURE BELONGS TO**

Professionals who combine expertise with context, execution with empathy, and technology with human judgement.

Redrawn, text as published, from the graphic that ran with the article. Centre of the original: "Forward Deployed Careers".

Hari Paruchuri, tihnkering · ETEducation, 11 September 2026