What Employees Expect from AI: Characteristics and directionality within a plurality of AI expectations

Authors: Otto Hedenmo, Jönköping University, otto.hedenmo@ju.se
Maria Riveiro, Jönköping University, maria.riveiro@ju.se
Annika Engström, Jönköping University, annika.engstrom@ju.se
Nina Edh, Jönköping University, nina.edh@ju.se
Carla Gonçalves Machado, Jönköping University, carla.goncalvesmachado@ju.se
Daniel Pittino, Jönköping University, daniel.pittino@ju.se
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ABSTRACT

AI is viewed as the next major technological breakthrough for organizations. The range of areas, professions, and practices that can be improved with AI assistance or automation is overwhelming. However, this wide array of possibilities also brings a variety of expectations about how AI will change organizations and employees' everyday work. Considering that voiced expectations influence adoption processes by both reflecting and shaping certain relational, belief-driven dynamics, we can learn a great deal about AI adoption by studying the organizational plurality of AI expectations. Therefore, this study examined AI expectations held by employees in three organizations currently adopting AI for use in the workplace. The study is based on a thematic analysis of empirical material form 15 focus groups in three Swedish AI-adopting organizations and shows how AI expectations shape the following: (1) a growing desire to move from exploring AI to establishing AI routines and regulations, (2) emerging dilemmas related to both the violation and fulfillment of AI promises, and (3) how dynamics and unpredictability in the AI field require organizations to adapt to shifting trends and innovations.

Introduction

Few have missed the buzz surrounding AI, an umbrella term defined here as encompassing numerous data-driven, self-learning, automated, and digital technological innovations that have quickly become part of organizational processes and structures (Lindgren, 2024). The increasing use of AI is transforming organizations, affecting work processes from employee recruitment and product manufacturing (Jackson et al., 2024) to how communication flows coordinate and organize people (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2024). These technologies are being rapidly and widely adopted by organizations, requiring a diverse range of professionals to understand what to *expect* from these technologies. Inevitably, multiple understandings have emerged. While these offer opportunities for innovative approaches, they also carry risks—such as organizational disagreements, conflicts, and inertia—stemming from the absence of a common direction.

In technological adoption processes, voicing expectations allows organizations to make sense of the new technology (Engström et al., 2024 and to "develop and enact projects, plans and strategies"

(Beckert, 2016, p. 14) that also reflect and inform collective beliefs. Most likely, this is also true for *AI* adoption processes. Characteristics of AI expectations, therefore, bring insights into the social formations that AI, as a phenomenon, invites and enforces. In this study, we highlight the presence of AI expectations in organizations and explore how they inform current adoption processes in order to contribute to knowledge about these expectations and the organizational environments that need to address them.

Expectations here are defined as individual understandings shaped by social constructs regarding how the future will unfold. We use a broad definition that includes aspects ranging from professional estimations to hopes and fears about AI. Two elements in AI adoption processes make this broad definition necessary and the organizational management of AI expectations essential: 1) AI adoption is happening virtually everywhere in both private and professional spheres and involving multiple departments, professions, and stakeholders with diverse needs, ideas, and expectations; and 2) the technology is not new as a social construct and, therefore, is already connected to personal beliefs, experiences, and societal discourses about its potentials and dangers. As such, what people expect from AI is highly multifaceted and somewhat "fuzzy" (Willim, 2024, p. 57; see also Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020).

As an organizational change process, introducing AI can be viewed as non-linear, dynamic, relational, and co-created within a surrounding organizational context (Lewis, 2019). In other words, adopting new tools and technologies involves personal experiences, public dialogues, myths about other organizations' adoption processes, and more: all contribute to shaping expectations and informing how change processes evolve. The two elements noted consequently lessen organizations' control of AI adoption processes, placing organizations more in a position wherein knowledge about employees' evolving expectations becomes key to managing the introduction of AI. Indeed, if organizations are to coordinate and legitimize a particular AI transformation, they must adhere to the transboundary, cross-sectoral, and cross-professional nature of AI (van Lente, 2012). Therefore, knowledge about the variety and characteristics of AI expectations in organizations brings valuable insights for research on the dynamic topic of sociotechnical AI integration and for organizations actively maneuvering these complex processes.

Thus, this study was intended to deepen our understanding of the plurality and features of organizational AI expectations and how they influence AI adoption processes. We qualitatively examined AI expectations within three Swedish companies in the industry/technology sector, each in the process of adopting AI technologies. By thematically analyzing empirical material from 15 focus group discussions with company employees regarding their expectations of AI, we examined the nuances and relationships of voiced AI expectations and explored how their characteristics provide direction for organizational AI adoption processes.

Next, we review previous research on AI expectations and how it informed the current study. Then, a theoretical discussion on expectations is presented, followed by an outline of the investigation method. Finally, the results are presented, discussed, and concluded.

Previous studies on AI expectations

People's expectations about the future have long been a concern across scientific fields. Research on our thoughts about tomorrow and beyond ranges from local, action-oriented studies to broader societal discourses (Beckert, 2016). This includes ideas about AI.

At a microlevel, tech-focused studies, such as those based on expectation-confirmation theory (ECT) or the technology acceptance model (TAM), have examined how AI use is influenced by user expectations about "what will happen during and after the interaction [with AI]" (Grimes et al., 2021, p. 1). The goal has been to assess perceived AI performance in terms of usefulness and satisfaction (e.g., Li & Wang, 2025). Using this approach, they connect individuals' expectations of AI capabilities with how people practically use AI (Grimes et al., 2021), as well as with people's experiences and actions after engaging with AI (Jenssen et al., 2025; Li & Wang, 2025).

While these studies ontologically differ from our research, they demonstrate how AI use informs practice and connects to social processes. An example provided by Nguyen et al. (2025) showed how employees' expectations of AI are linked to social consequences, including whether people discuss their expectations and experiences with AI. Personal expectations and experiences, thus, generate relational consequences that inevitably influence others' expectations of AI. However, while these studies have illustrated that expectations socially matter, they lack qualitative understanding of the actual expectations they examined: that is, the "nuances" (Nguyen et al., 2025, p. 814) that differentiate people's expectations and how (and what) "socially accepted perceptions" (Jensen et al., 2025, p. 29) regarding motives, barriers, and context inform their expectations.

AI expectations can be seen as an umbrella term that covers various related theoretical areas, such as imaginaries (Christensen, 2025), dreams (Stevens et al., 2022), promises (Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2023), and anticipation (Hautala & Ahlqvist, 2024). In various ways, these studies have contributed to our knowledge about what people expect from AI. For example, sociotechnical imaginaries, the "collectively imagined forms of social life and social order" (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 120), have explored how broad societal ideas about AI link to social and political discussions that frame AI as a phenomenon (e.g., Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022). Additionally, they examined how public interest surrounding AI fosters ideas of technological optimism, societal progress, and competitive discourses regarding adoption of AI before others; they also examined how some ideas (e.g., AI-related security, responsibility, and ethics) are culturally specific and, therefore, dependent on context (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022; Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2023).

These overarching ideas about AI have implications for organizations, including how AI strategies and action programs at various levels are intended to guide organizations in a specific direction (Kannelønning, 2023; Stevens et al., 2022). However, when general top-down expectations about AI intersect with employees' expectations, the adoption process becomes more complex, conflicted, and requires negotiation (Hautala & Ahlqvist, 2024; Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020). For example, while organizations' strategic expectations of AI tend to focus on progress and efficiency, employees' expectations include a wide range of anticipations, such as hopes for decolonial processes (Seto, 2025) and affectionate 'dreams' of becoming better professionals (Stevens et al., 2022). Prior research has indicated the multifaceted nature of AI expectations and how these perceptions connect not only to 'desired' futures (Borup et al., 2006) but also to unwanted changes and 'nightmares' to avoid (Stevens et al., 2022).

Given that the variety of employees' AI expectations tends to be complex and evolving and includes ideas about hope, ethics, and concerns (Corsini et al., 2025), the constitution of AI expectations raises questions that the organizational AI adoption process must seriously address—such as regarding work ethics and corporate responsibility. However, while many organizations establish mechanisms through which employees can critique AI, studies indicate their ability to influence the process remains limited (e.g., Kannelønning, 2023), leaving employees feeling they have "no voice in the process" (Seto, 2025, p. 13).

Our reading of the literature on AI expectations revealed how employees' AI expectations are both more complex than what the dominating number of tech-oriented studies address and more reflective than what is usually covered in broad and over-the-top aspirational strategies to nurture the potential from AI adoption. Employees' expectations are reflected not only in technical skills but also in deeper professional and cultural values about how and why AI should be used. Our aim was, therefore, to contribute to a more profound understanding of the plurality of AI expectations that exist within the organizational context and how they inform certain social formations among employees. Understanding the organizational variation in AI expectations enabled us to illuminate certain alignments of ideas, but also friction and conflicts, that underpin today's organizational AI adoption processes.

How we understand AI expectations

As mentioned, we recognize expectations broadly and as socially shaped individual understandings regarding how the future will unfold. As Beckert (2016) asserted, expectations are "interpretive frames that structure situations through imaginaries of future states of the world and of causal relations" (p. 9). To theoretically position expectations in the organizational realm, we referenced Weick's (1995) idea of expectations as "starting points" (p. 148) for organizations' belief-driven processes. While expectations always exist in organizing, Weick maintained they flourish during periods of instability, change, or "unfinished business" (see also van Lente, 2012). Voiced expectations, whether expressing desire and longing or risks and nightmares, then become starting points for developing "orderly interaction around *expecting*," which, by becoming meaningful, creates a "potent force in their own validation" (Weick, 1995, p. 134). Through employees' interpersonal relations, organizations develop dominating expectations on a particular matter that inform certain organizational doings.

Since the future is illusory for everyone, the concept of expectations closely relates to perceptions of uncertainty (Beckert, 2016). Expectations can be considered understandings of the future imagined more certain, or plausible, than others. Coordinating expectations, therefore, essentially reflects a collective method aimed at reducing perceptions of uncertainty. However, while expressed expectations can appear far-fetched, irregular, and chaotic (e.g., Willim, 2024), they are inevitably directed toward specific organizational or contextual elements. This *directionality* of uncertainties (van Lente, 2012, p. 774) is important to understanding how expectations are grounded in a potential future and to characterizing AI expectations and discussing their influence for organizational formation.

Previous studies have theorized different forms of such directionalities. In developing our framework, we take inspiration from the conceptualization of uncertainties in change processes from

Bordia, Hobman et al., (2004), see also Bordia, Hunt et al. (2004). These scholars argue that employees primarily direct their uncertainties through three approaches: *strategic* ("reasons for change, planning and future direction of the organization"), *structural* (changes to such aspects as "reporting structures and functions of different work-units"), and *job-related* ("job security, promotion opportunities, changes to the job role, and so forth") (Bordia, Hobman et al., 2004, pp. 510–511). However, while these categories focus on the employee–organization relationship, change processes are not isolated but involve elements that are somewhat out of the organization's control (Lewis, 2014, 2019), particularly regarding transboundary questions, such as those related to AI (see Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020). Informed by the literature review, we therefore propose that to grasp AI expectations within an organization, a *contextual* direction of uncertainties (toward changes outside the organization) must be added.

Nevertheless, while the strategic, structural, job-related, and contextual categories characterize the direction of expectations, they give little guidance on organizational consequences. As expectations are voiced, developed, and empowered in interpersonal interactions, expectations scale up and move through organizations in ways that change organizing. The directionality of expectations can indicate where these changes may manifest. Processes related to how expectations impact and evolve on a societal dimension are theorized in research on the sociology of expectations (Beckert, 2016; van Lente, 2012). We take inspiration from those ideas to explore the movement of expectations within the organizational realm. Specifically, we base our approach on Borup et al. (2006), who theorized how expectations of technological change influence social formations in vertical, horizontal, and temporal ways.

Here we used the vertical, horizontal, and temporal dimensions as a framework to explore and discuss how the directionality of AI expectations carry potential consequences for organizations. *Vertically*, expectations mediate different scales of an organization. For example, expectations expressed in small talk can find ways of becoming or opposing superior and overarching expectations, and vice versa. Expectations thereby vertically align and coordinate with (or transform and scatter) a particular direction. (For an excellent empirical example, see Christensen, 2025.) *Horizontally*, expectations perform by resonating, or not resonating, across organizational boundaries, such as departments, professions, and other collectives, albeit through different ways and consequences of performing in each grouping. *Temporality* reflects how the 'potent force' of expectations evolves over time from "a new set of organized cues that have become meaningful" (Weick, 1995, p. 147), whereby new conditions and problems necessitate adaptation.

By understanding AI expectations as socially constructed, this study differs from dominant rationalistic perspectives that treat expectations as numeric scales from true/false or rational/irrational (e.g., TAM, ECT) and, instead, focuses on exploring nuances, alignments, and contradictions of AI expectations. By understanding expectations as social, we look beyond the "accuracy" of expectations (Buschmeyer et al., 2022, p. 447) and focus on their constitutive functionality in organizational change practices. Through this framework, we contribute with a novel understanding of how AI expectations shape organizations through their character and direction.

Method of analysis

This study was developed from an interactive research approach in which the research purpose was created and the collection of empirical material conducted through collaboration between academic and industry professionals. Interactive research is "characterized by recurrent interactions and joint learning activities between researchers and practitioners in commonly agreed upon efforts to study change and innovation in organizations" (Ellström et al., 2020, p. 1520). The project to which this study adhered investigated the managerial processes of integrating AI in organizations. To gain knowledge in this context, the project group (comprising industry partners and academic researchers) had been working together for five years to actively identifying methods for how to incorporate AI into their organizations. In this work, the project group identified the nuances and directions of AI expectations as a relevant phenomenon to investigate and contribute to research.

As we view expectations as ideas of the future, a qualitative method (Howitt, 2019) was necessary to gain descriptions of work–life conditions and hopes and concerns related to the AI adoption process and AI as a phenomenon. The empirical material comprised transcripts from 15 focus group sessions conducted across the three partner companies, five sessions at each. Focus groups are valuable for exploring phenomena wherein people possess a variety of understandings (Gustafsson, 2014) while allowing participants to introduce, reflect on, and challenge each other's expectations. As Weick (1995) argued, as employees "dwell on what might happen, people's expectations become better articulated" (p. 134). The focus group sessions began with a researcher facilitating a company-specific focus group and then training company representatives to lead their own groups. In this way, 12 of the 15 sessions were conducted by the companies themselves. The research team had positive experiences with this setup in previous work and had conducted similar focus groups, in terms of companies and questions, five years earlier (Engström et al., 2024, 2025). Participating companies, located in Sweden, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The companies that participated in the collaborative, interactive research project.

	Company A	**Company B**	**Company C**
Year of establishment	1945	1977	1992
Product	lighting product manufacturer	C-parts manufacturer/ supplier	technology consultancy service
Revenue Thousands Euro	124,000 (2024)	465,254 (2020)	386,848 (2024)
Number of employees in Sweden	~500 employees	~1,300 employees	~2,100 employees

White-collar employees from various departments and professions, including analytics, human resources, engineering, information technology, product development, communications, and others, participated in the focus group discussions, which did not diverge much company-wise, probably due to participants' office-centered work. The most obvious divergences were the company-specific examples raised by participants (e.g., lighting solutions or C-parts). All sessions were conducted

in Swedish, lasted about 60 minutes, involved around 60 employees, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The focus groups were organized around six questions: (1) What is your spontaneous reaction when you hear the concept of AI? (2) What do you think AI is in practice? (3) In what applications can AI be applied within your organization? (4) What can AI be used for near your own work area? (5) What consequences can AI have for your organization/work? (6) How can your organization prepare itself and you in the best way for the application of AI? While none of the questions explicitly mentioned "expectations," they were designed to encourage participants to share their ideas about the future with AI by directing discussions toward what could happen. The discussions started broadly and then focused increasingly on work-related aspects. This approach generated rich insights, with participants offering a range of ideas about how AI might influence strategic, structural, job-related, and contextual elements of the organization.

Analysis

To explore the diversity, character, and relationships of AI expectations, we used thematic analysis, a simple yet "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). This approach gave us the flexibility to interpret the material while staying grounded in our theoretical framework. Our analysis started with familiarization with the material and then initial coding, followed by systematically developing categories and themes through ongoing review, refinement, and questioning.

We approached the material in an open and exploratory way (Saldaña, 2015, p. 213) by coding excerpts in which participants shared ideas about how AI will influence the future. Codes were described as, for example, "AI as administrative support" or "AI as efficiency." Throughout the process, we continuously revised the codes, checking whether similar codes already existed. The goal was, however, to keep the labels as nuanced as possible. For example, codes labeled "AI ambivalence" included keywords (e.g., "efficiency/replacement") to capture the subtleties of ambiguity in the quotations. In total, 467 codes were created.

Next, we colored the codes by interpreting the relation of the expectations of AI to the four directions mentioned (Bordia, Hobman et al., 2004; Lewis, 2019):

- Strategic: Related to future directions for the organization
- Structural: Related to structural changes for the organization
- Job-related: Related to changes to the job role
- Contextual: Related to change outside the organization

The color coding provided us with an overview of the codes' organizational location and direction. For example, it showed that job-related and contextual expectations were dominant, while strategic and structural codes were less prominent.

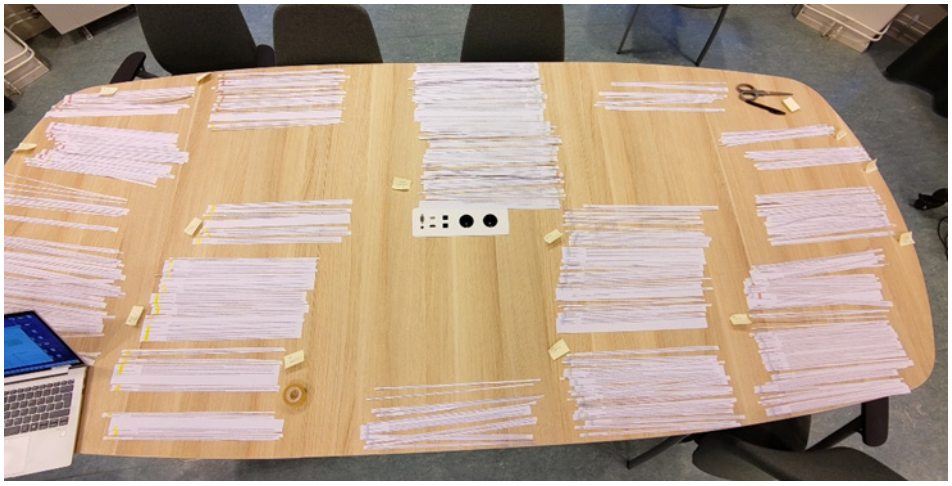

Figure 1: Grouping of codes

Next, we grouped the codes based on how they reflected certain hopes, fears, and ideas about what to expect from AI (see Figure 1). We developed the groups inductively, resulting in labels such as "tech-optimism," "AI as admin/text support," and "AI needs a plan." The color coding visually highlighted how some expectations clearly related to particular directions, while others were more scattered.

In the final step, we identified four themes of statements that "expand[ed] on the major ideas" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 260) about AI expectations. We focused on understanding specific relationships by examining how the groups aligned with, contradicted, or simply coexisted with each other within the material. See Table 2 for the themes, groups, and directions that dominated.

Table 2: Focus group analysis: themes (top row), groups (below themes), and dominating directions (left column)

	Echoes and conflicts of tech optimism	**Expectations of strategy**	**Perceived necessity for structured AI readiness**	**Hopes of leaving modern organizing**
Strategic		• AI as strategic risk • AI needs planning		
Structural	• AI as structural risk • AI for prognosing future		• AI demands a learning organization	• AI as auditor/ reviewer
Job-related	• AI for analysis • Improved customer relationships		• AI as competence/job security	• AI as admin/text support
Contextual	• Tech optimism • AI critique • AI ambivalence	• AI as inevitable		

In the following sections, we present the four themes and discuss them in relation to the vertical, horizontal, and temporal dimensions introduced previously. All excepts were translated into English by the researchers.

Themes of AI expectations

In this section, we introduce our four themes: "echoes and conflicts of tech optimism," "expectations of strategy," "perceived necessity for structured AI readiness," and "hopes of leaving modern organizing." The themes are arranged from the most overarching, general expectations to the most specific and closest to work, with quotations from the focus group participants included to support our analysis.

While this investigation focused on employees' expectations about AI, a variety of understandings about "what AI *is*" emerged. Some participants conveyed a conceptually open attitude toward AI by inquiring, for example, as to what AI application was being discussed, but most equated the term with predictive or generative AI (i.e., large language models [LLMs], such as ChatGPT or Copilot). One reason these types of AI were prominent was the text-intensive nature of the participants' professions. Regardless of whether they were using AI for coding, benchmarking, or recruiting new employees, most were using it to develop or process text. We interpret this dominating understanding of AI as an imaginary focused on envisioning the text-assisting and bureaucratic potentials of AI, encouraged by the tsunami of LLMs washing over organizations and individuals in the last three years.

Echoes and conflicts of tech optimism

The focus group discussions typically began with participants sharing broad ideas about AI, expressing optimism, criticism, and feelings of ambivalence. The predefined questions prompted the groups to begin with wider questions about "societal impact," which helped guide the flow of the conversations. Our analysis, therefore, easily indicated how overarching ideas about AI, coexisting within and across the focus groups, created a delicate balance between views of AI as introducing potential improvements and possible disasters.

Optimistic ideas about AI shared similarities with national and tech-enthusiastic discourses that highlight AI's potential (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022). Participants echoed these common ideas by connecting AI to concepts like efficiency, productivity, and societal progress. Common in this regard was viewing AI as limitless. One Company A participant explained: "Well, it is actually just our fantasies that set the limit. If the challenge is processing the data, then there is no limit. The development is that fast." Comments like these, which stress AI as unlimited, inevitable, and a force of nature, reflect optimistic and unquestioning beliefs linking AI to overall improvements, both quantitative (e.g., optimization) and qualitative (e.g., error reduction). Expectations from accepting tech enthusiasts considered AI as just another tool while omitting details about how, why, and with what consequences.

Hopes of reducing errors supported AI as another tool to improve work tasks and replace other tools. AI-driven improvements to reduce flaws were often linked to specific tasks, such as deepening customer knowledge or developing analytical processes, but also framed AI as a solution to myriad problems. As one Company A participant stated, "I think it [AI] could also ensure quality similar to human intelligence. However, it doesn't experience fatigue or other human factors, so it can both maintain and improve quality while increasing efficiency." This excerpt exemplifies tech-optimistic reasoning in which replacing human intelligence can lead to increased quality and efficiency. This can be interpreted as part of a solutionist reasoning (Lindgren, 2024, pp. 61–62) in which arguments for an AI solution omit questions of social complexity while focusing on benefits such as

"quality" and "efficiency." Expressions like these echoed progressive ideas commonly found in AI strategies and action programs (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022).

Conversely, participants also expressed fears and anxieties when criticizing how AI could change society. These concerns included various perceptions of AI weaknesses, such as unreliability, misuse, replacing people, or a general sense of fear.

> *I feel a certain fear and worry for what it [AI] can mean for ... our society, for us. I understand that there might be a lot of upsides to it, but it feels like—at least for my part—I am not informed enough to say anything. But … I feel fear about what it could mean to us. If that is because I have watched too many movies or read too much, I don't know, … but I can feel more worried than joyful about it. (Company A Participant)*

Through analysis, we observed how AI-optimistic discourses coexisted with these concerns about how the technology will impact the environment outside the organization. Although they recognized the benefits (the "upsides to it,") AI as a social phenomenon was perceived as unreliable and erratic. However, while the unreflective nature of tech optimism was built on rational ideas and specifics, critical voices emphasized vague feelings of "fear" and "worry," highlighting an underlying uncertainty that follows the current AI trend in which expectations of AI are based not only on rational beliefs but also on myths, feelings, and hunches.

Amid both optimistic and unfavorable views, employees also expressed instant ambivalence by balancing expectations for improvement with fears of disaster. "I believe it's a huge opportunity but also a small threat, if we are to be honest" (Company A Participant). This AI ambivalence was rarely thoughtless or unclear; instead, it emerged from specific expressions that raised opportunities and concerns. As such, comments about AI ambivalence involved perceived positives *and* negatives, such as efficiency versus stupefying, increased human contact versus uncontrolled data sharing, and simplification versus security threat. Together, these expressions reflected a larger theme of mixed expectations, whereby AI adoption was seen as not entirely good or bad but, instead, as uncertain and in need of a cautious, balanced approach.

> *Both positive and negative: that's my spontaneous reaction today. It's cool to see what AI can do and cool to … experience … all the improvements that happen within the company. But I also believe it is a bit scary when it comes to replacing people within … some areas and to what extent. (Company B Participant)*

Coexisting expectations that reflect optimism, critique, and ambivalence illustrate how employees' views on AI's societal and contextual impact are not fixed to a certain imaginary but, as Stevens et al. (2022) also emphasized, open to negotiation and change. By showing how tech optimism coexisted with employees questioning the reasons and methods for adopting AI, mixes of unreflective certainty, perceptions of fear, and ambivalence reflected the overall notion of unpredictability regarding what will change when adopting AI.

Expectations of strategy

While the previous theme highlighted how employees perceived unpredictability and uncertainty about how AI will change the organizational context, uncertainty was also prominent in the theme "expectations of strategy" but related to expectations about how to organizationally navigate this

uncharted territory. The theme "expectations of strategy" underscores a dominating expectation on leadership and management to make strategic decisions, especially to avoid unwanted risks.

Although optimism, critique, and ambivalence about AI coexisted among the focus group participants, the decision of whether to adopt AI was never up for debate. AI was perceived as an unavoidable innovation to which the organization needed to adapt. As a Company C participant said, "We need to have mature organizations for this [AI], but we also need to question our own maturity for it.… We cannot choose not to.… We need to be on the wagon or else it [AI adoption] won't work."

As an organizational response, employees directed their expectations toward management for guidance. Participants conveyed expectations for the long-term vision of the organizational AI initiative ("Where we are in three years and where we are in … whenever that might be"), as well as for help in minimizing unwanted risks among staff.

> *I mean, it is not dangerous to say, "yes" [to] Chat-GPT [and] "how to use it." There must be these … like, I am thinking, from the company … how to use it and for what parts. What is fine and what is absolutely not fine to do. (Company B Participant)*

We interpreted that employees hoped to gain relief from general unpredictability and, sometimes, fears about misusing AI from management strategies. Employees' discomfort with improper use did not seem linked to any past misuse within the companies but was, instead, tied to myths, media stories, and anecdotes about AI that employees had heard elsewhere, such as concerns about data sharing, cheating, and fake content. The perceived need for guidance highlights challenges pertaining to AI being adopted at work, at home, and in life simultaneously. Here, experiences, myths, and examples from the professional and personal realms contributed to making expectations of AI less clear and more speculative.

The perceived need for strategy and direction was interpreted as an expectation, or hope, to reduce uncertainties, harness potential, and manage risks. However, along with these strategic expectations, structural expectations also emerged about how the organization would reduce the uncertainties.

The expected necessity for structured AI readiness

The idea that AI (or technology in general) will "take our jobs" is common in the history of technological change. Predictably, this idea was raised during the focus group discussions. However, the participants' lack of concern about this was surprising. Participants considered the loss of jobs to be more likely to affect others than themselves.

> *Some are like "yeah, AI will take your job." I don't really believe that, but I think we will have to change many work tasks, or parts of work tasks, and optimize many processes. But what I do think is that if you are opposing it and definitely do not want to learn anything, completely reluctant, then I think there is a risk that you get replaced with someone who actually gets it. (Company C Participant)*

This excerpt illustrates how the need for AI skills among employees is expected to grow, while the fear of being replaced was essentially absent. This diverges from previous studies that suggest fear of job loss was a central theme in AI adoption (e.g., Willcocks, 2020). Our focus group participants did not view AI as a threat, instead emphasizing the need for humans to ensure its proper

functioning. This skepticism toward AI has been highlighted elsewhere (e.g. Sondern et al., 2025). However, prominent in our material was skepticism about AI's ability to handle social qualities (e.g., human-to-human interactions), as well as a desire for someone to manage the AI.

> *What kind of AI is it? Who will own the AI? Who will train the AI? Who will understand the way AI makes decisions? These are also competencies you need to secure in one way or another. If you dare to outsource everything, hand out all information, or to have the competence in-house, these questions you need to address, too. (Company A Participant)*

Employees expressed an expectation that developing the workforce in an AI-ready manner was inevitable but questioned who would prepare the organization. While similar studies suggest learning is expected at the team level (Hautala & Ahlqvist, 2024), our analysis indicates that employees directed the expectation to learn toward the organizational structure. That is, to be AI-ready, opportunities to learn AI need to be embedded in organizational routines and workflows.

> *We need to build knowledge here and now to understand this [AI] and get very … clear leadership about how to get … the human to keep up and wanting to keep up in this transformation, instead of forcing them into something. (Company B Participant)*

The expectation was, thus, not a perceived need to "go back to school" but, rather, that the organization would, out of necessity, provide opportunities for employees to learn how to adopt AI solutions or, as a participant from Company A phrased it, to "educate" the workforce about AI.

> *I just wanted to say that education, a basic education, about what it [AI] is, what clear pitfalls or clear … positive stuff we can use from it, is really, really basic, so that everyone has some kind of basic level [knowledge] about it. I believe that is a really great start.*

Therefore, structures were expected to educate the workforce on how to use AI effectively while also ensuring competent human oversight of AI systems. Although our analysis uncovered employees' awareness that they need to learn, any specific expectations about *what* they had to learn remained vague (see also Engström et al., 2025). Participants described AI learning initiatives as similar to "some kind of education or knowledge about it. It doesn't need to be that detailed or in-depth, but to understand how it works in general" (Company A Participant). Again, the uncertainty of what to expect from AI rose to the surface. In the background of the dominating expectation that "AI will change everything," unpredictability about what AI will actually bring to the organization was percolating. However, employees became more specific when discussions shifted to how AI might change their daily work practices.

Hopes of leaving modern organizing

Overall, the fourth theme, "hopes of leaving modern organizing," connects expectations that were closely related to employees' work tasks; consequently, detailed reflections about participants' immediate work environment dominated. Due to participants' diverse professional backgrounds, the work tasks discussed varied. However, two overriding expectations emerged across the groups: hopes for administrative relief and structured auditing. Together, these expectations formed a theme that we interpreted as reflecting hopes of moving away from work tasks associated with modern organizing, where reporting, documentation, and auditing are central.

Participants viewed AI as a tool that could support text processing and help manage administrative tasks, mostly associated with various LLMs. These expectations involved specific activities, such as summarizing meeting notes, creating PowerPoint slides, and reporting work hours. For the participants, this administrative relief was expected to give time to focus on human-to-human tasks, which were viewed as more creative, qualitative, and enjoyable.

> *Sometimes there's a lot of repetitive, and just a lot of handling with old systems. ... [A] dream scenario might be to have a small "AI buddy" to keep you company while working. It knows everything you know, too, or everything you have written about, and it could handle all these boring tasks because it works really fast, giving you more time for what is critical. I think that would make it a bit more fun, too, ... in some way. (Company C Participant)*

This quote suggests that AI with efficiency and autonomy could handle administrative tasks to clear time for more important creative and high-quality work. Essentially, these expectations reflected an everyday work environment that employees did not consider fulfilling or meaningful. Administrative tasks were seen as what prevented them from making work more valuable. "The benefits [with AI] come in the form of increased efficiency and maybe an opportunity to make time for something else, and more valuable" (Company A Participant).

Employees argued that "death tasks" or "boring tasks" dominated their workdays. The urge to make work more meaningful is well-supported in organizational research and commonly connected to aversions toward rationalistic ideas of modern organizing (e.g., Alvesson, 2019; Bornemark, 2018). However, in our analysis, these aversions did not manifest in ideas of removing these tasks but in allocating them to AI. In participants' reflections, this involved both developing text and auditing their own work.

> *Yes, but I believe that AI could also act as some kind of "gatekeeper" for a quality label. To understand that—okay, now we are approaching the launch of a product—is this product ready? Do you have all the numbers in the right places? Do we have our data files in the right place? Does it have all the pictures? It [AI] can just validate that everything is okay for launch. (Company A Participant)*

Essentially, regardless of whether AI expectations referred to an AI buddy or a background validator, the hope was for AI to ensure that operations were running according to plan. What manifested in the analysis was the idea of AI as a framework for maintaining the organization to function as it already does while making daily work practices more meaningful.

These expectations for identifying approaches to make organizing more meaningful have been highlighted in AI studies before (Hautala & Heino, 2023; Stevens et al., 2022). The hopes for relief from administrative duties can reflect a deeper desire to escape certain aspects of modern work, evoked by AI's affordances to assist or audit work practices—such as reviewing data, ensuring standards are met, and maintaining quality. However, the ways AI affordances would provide a more meaningful work environment were vague and primarily linked to time efficiency. This was further emphasized in the unclear directionality of AI as administrative relief, where we observed a lack of clarity regarding whether employees would introduce the relief themselves or if that relief was supposed to result from a structural change within the organization.

Next, we elaborate on what the four themes reveal about AI adoption processes.

Discussion: Expectations and directionality in AI adoption processes

In the introduction, we argued that employee expectations reflect, on the one hand, the current state of their organizations and how closely they are intertwined with AI. On the other hand, the themes also allowed us to interpret and discuss how AI expectations shape and enforce certain organizational formations. By departing from the vertical, horizontal, and temporal dimensions presented by Borup et al. (2006), in this section, we explore what our four themes say about AI adoption in organizations based on the directionality of actions that AI expectations invite or enforce. We present three main insights that are key to characterizing today's AI adoption processes: (1) transitions toward regulation, (2) conflicts over meaningfulness, and (3) dynamics and unpredictability.

Vertically, the analysis indicated employees' AI expectations were directed toward specific organizational levels, mainly upward and toward management, for instance, in expecting managerial AI strategies and structured AI learning initiatives. These findings suggest a shift in organizational adoption processes from an acceptance of the chaotic, playful, and exploratory mindset that previously shaped these processes (e.g., Engström et al., 2024) toward expectations that focus more on strategizing, education, and regulation. The findings also suggest that the expectation for regulations is linked to an overall perception of uncertainty, reflected in employees' vagueness and lack of clarity about what to explicitly strategize and learn regarding AI. This uncertainty was reflected in the many myths, hearsay, and anecdotes about AI misuse that employees mentioned. In our analysis, we connect this uncertainty–stability relationship to Weick's (1995) argument that in times of uncertainty, "what people need is some form of stability" (p. 153) and that perceptions of stability are shaped by the myths we believe in (McPhee & Zaug, 2001) and the routines we follow (March, 1981). Thus, our analysis contributes to showing how employees today seek AI stability by looking upward with expectations for directives and structures to balance mythology with routines and regulations.

In the horizontal dimension, hopes for changing work practices dominated, manifesting in the desire to reduce textual administration and implement automated auditing processes. Employees expressed that their workdays comprised parallel situations, with one side of work, such as completing administrative tasks like documenting and calculating, considered repetitive and meaningless, while the other side was viewed as meaningful and consisting of core practices, that is, working creatively and human-to-human (also discussed by Bornemark, 2018). The hope for AI to amputate meaningless functions and make work life more substantive is logical and understandable. However, employees struggled to explain *what* more consequential work tasks would entail. An overall uncertainty regarding what AI would bring also lingered in employees' expectations about work life, making expectations about what to move away from considerably more specific than expectations about what to move toward. This ambiguity becomes paradoxical for companies adopting AI and puts them in a certain dilemma: to either violate hopes of meaningfulness through strategic decisions, technological limitations, or inadequate implementation *or* to succeed in meeting expectations, only to find that meaningfulness is unevenly distributed and that employees struggle to identify activities that make work more purposeful. Regardless of what path organizations end up following, this dilemma carries risks of resentment and criticism within the workforce.

Certain temporal characteristics distinguish the research period and reflect the dynamics and unpredictability of organizational AI adoption processes. As mentioned, the research team previously conducted similar focus groups five years earlier involving the same questions and companies (Engström et al., 2024, 2025). Comparing the two periods, we observed a notable increase in more vivid expectations related to administrative affordances and less toward the overarching societal consequences of AI. This change may be linked to the recent widespread adoption of LLMs, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini, which have introduced new work expectations that were less prominent previously. Similar fluctuations of AI expectations have been shown to exist at societal levels for decades (Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2023). Through this study, we hope to bring insight into how these temporal dynamics, flows, and unpredictabilities shape AI innovations at the organizational level, prompting companies to adapt accordingly.

Conclusion

By exploring AI expectations among employees in three organizations within the industry/technology sector, we identified four themes that highlight the current diversity of expectations in AI-adopting organizations and how these expectations link to specific directions that socially inform organizations. Our analysis shows how these directions shape (1) a growing desire to move from exploring AI to establishing routines and regulations, (2) emerging conflicts related to the violation and fulfillment of AI promises about meaningfulness, and (3) how the dynamics and unpredictability in AI development require organizations to adapt to shifting trends and innovations.

Based on an interactive research approach, this study provides insights into questions perceived as important for AI-adopting organizations and, consequently, adds value to their adoption processes. Furthermore, by developing a framework that links ideas from organizational and social sciences to explore the presence, relationality, plurality, and dynamics in the AI expectations phenomenon, the study also theoretically and practically contributes to sociotechnical AI research. We hope this spurs further studies on the constantly changing nature of AI expectations.

Limitations

This study's main limitation is the lack of firsthand experience with the empirical material. The researchers had access to the material only through anonymized transcriptions, which meant they lacked insight into who said what in the focus groups. Accordingly, we lacked insights into how workers' expectations were reflected in management or vice versa. Additionally, the material was not analyzed in a longitudinal way, preventing any deeper analysis of how expectations develop over time. Both limitations offer valuable directions for future research.

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