



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

The AI Trust Paradox at Work: Exploring Employee Ambivalence in Everyday Workplace Practices and Decision-Making

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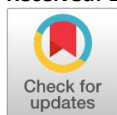
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Abstract— Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly integrated into workplace practices and decision-making, offering opportunities to improve efficiency while creating uncertainty regarding the accuracy, appropriateness, and accountability of AI-generated outputs. Employees may therefore rely on AI while simultaneously questioning its recommendations and limitations. This study explores how employees experience and negotiate trust in AI during their everyday workplace practices and decision-making processes. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to examine the lived experiences of 26 employees from diverse occupational sectors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in employees' experiences, perceptions, and practices regarding AI. The findings indicate that employees neither fully trust nor reject AI. Instead, their reliance varies according to task characteristics, perceived risks, organizational demands, and professional accountability. Six empirical themes were identified and subsequently interpreted through three interconnected workplace practices: adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification. Together, these practices created a condition of functional ambivalence, in which employees recognized AI's usefulness while remaining concerned about accuracy, overdependence, originality, critical thinking, and accountability. Verification, contextual evaluation, and selective reliance were central practices for managing uncertainty surrounding AI outputs. Trust in workplace AI is better understood as a negotiated process rather than a stable state of acceptance or rejection. Effective human-AI collaboration requires appropriate boundaries between technological assistance and human responsibility.

Index Terms— AI trust, Employee ambivalence, Workplace AI, Trust calibration, Human-AI collaboration

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly being used in the workplace, changing the way users interact with various systems and decisions they make at work (Ahn & Chen, 2022; Yu et al., 2023). A range of productivity-enhancing AI-based systems are available for use in the workplace (Bankins et al., 2024; Budhwar et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2023). AI changes the way organizations structure their technology and the kinds of decisions employees take at work. Employees must exercise their professional judgment when interacting with and integrating AI into their work

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(Chowdhury et al., 2022; Man Tang et al., 2022). Trust in AI refers to the degree of confidence employees have in relying on output of AI to make decisions at work (Afroogh et al., 2024; Choung et al., 2022; Glikson & Woolley, 2020). The trust employees place in AI depends on various characteristics of the system, including its reliability, competence, and predictability (Afroogh et al., 2024; Glikson & Woolley, 2020).

Existing studies primarily focus on the relationship between trust and the acceptance and use of technology (Vraňáková & Gyurák Babel'ová, 2025). According to the Technology Adoption framework, more trust in AI would help build the acceptance level and ultimately the tendency to use AI within the workflow (Cao et al., 2021; Vorm & Combs, 2022; Wu et al., 2011). More recent studies focus on trust in the context of collaboration with artificial intelligence, and include the concepts of calibrated trust, transparency, and human oversight (Benk et al., 2024; McGrath et al., 2025; Ulfert et al., 2024). While trust is considered an important factor in the acceptance of and collaboration with artificial intelligence, it may not entirely answer why employees raise such issues as the correctness and adequacy of AI, as well as its ethics and responsibility. It is also not the case that people will completely reject the use of AI. Rather, employees will evaluate the outcomes of the AI and decide on the level of trust in the AI (Cheung & Ho, 2025; Shrivastava, 2025; Valtonen et al., 2025).

This situation highlights a challenge associated with the use of AI at work creates: employees adopt the use of workplace AI, but feel uncomfortable with it. Relying on AI at work, while being uncomfortable with it creates, what this study calls the 'AI trust paradox.' This study takes a closer look at situations at work where reliance on AI and uncertainty about it occur together. One of the main concerns of this study is the assessment of the situations where reliance on AI by employees is influenced by a number of factors, including the nature of work and the amount of risk involved (Duong et al., 2026; Georganta & Ulfert, 2024; Lu et al., 2025). It is expected that employees will demonstrate trust in AI in situations perceived to require less risk and accountability, and vice versa. Thus, employees will rely on AI in the performance of some work tasks and retain control and responsibility for other work tasks. The concern of this study is not to investigate the extent to which employees trust or do not trust workplace AI. Instead, the focus is to understand the situations that influence employees' reliance on workplace AI.

The significance of this problem will only grow as AI moves to augment higher-order cognitive tasks (Zhang et al., 2026). In regard to such tasks, AI can help create information and suggestions and perform analyses, for which employees are obligated to determine relevance and adequacy to their work (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Man Tang et al., 2022). A prevalent practice will be to verify the suggestions, integrate the recommendations within the context of the situation, and make the ultimate decision, benefiting from the increased system speed and capacity (Anil & un Nisa, 2023; Cheung & Ho, 2025; Kellogg et al., 2020; Vorm & Combs, 2022). Thus, implementing reliance and maintaining professional judgment will be critical to managing risks (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). This will likely be the case even in the presence of AI. Reliance on AI, along with maintaining a healthy skepticism of the system, will likely become the new standard.

While many studies have examined employee trust, acceptance, and collaboration with AI in the workplace, few have studied how employees express and manage trust in the context of their day-to-day work. A substantial body of literature uses quantitative methods to examine trust, acceptance, and use of AI in the workplace and fails to explore how employees make trust decisions or how they perceive and interpret the boundaries of uncertainty (Ibrahim, 2026; McGrath et al., 2025; Park et al., 2024; Vuori et al., 2026). Additionally, recent studies have examined the integration of generative AI in the workplace and have identified threats to productivity and to trust and safety. However, these studies fail to explore how employees make decisions to trust or not trust AI, and how employees verify the outputs of AI (Callari & Puppione, 2025; Daly et al., 2025; Kemell et al., 2025; Simkute et al., 2025).

This research investigates how workers interact with and manage trust in Artificial Intelligence (AI) at work. The research uses the management perspective to explore trust in AI and focuses on practices to manage uncertainty. Trust in this research is studied as a management construct and not a psychological state of an individual. The research focuses on how employees adjust their confidence in AI. The study identifies three mechanisms through which employees manage their confidence in AI: Adaptive skepticism, in which employees maintain a healthy degree of skepticism by challenging and questioning AI; bounded reliance, in which employees manage the confidence they place in AI and retain final judgment over decisions; and verification, in which employees contextualize and validate recommendations generated by AI (Cheung & Ho, 2025; McGrath et al., 2025). The presence of these mechanisms creates a condition characterized by functional ambivalence (Einola & Khoreva, 2022; Irgang et al., 2025). At an advanced level of analysis, the researchers posit that employees' management of uncertainty in trusting AI is represented by epistemic instability.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do employees integrate AI into their work through trust, and how do they interact with AI to make work-related decisions?

RQ2: How do employees deal with uncertainty, doubt, and reliance on AI in the workplace?

This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore employees' situations or lived reality regarding engagement with and reliance on AI at work. Although a substantial body of literature has focused on the trust employees place in AI, this research explores the trust employees place in AI at work and how employees define the boundaries of reliance on AI at work. The outcomes of this research offer several implied and direct innovations on the trust employees place in AI at work and how employees define the limits of reliance on AI at work. This research serves and prepares organizations to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by employees' engagement with AI in the workplace and the implications for critical AI literacy.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

AI in the workplace

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the workplace changes the ways in which employees perform their jobs, access and interpret data, and ultimately reach conclusions at work. AI is becoming more and more complex and can be used to analyze data, process information, and make work-related decisions (Bankins et al., 2024; Budhwar et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2023). AI can also be used in conjunction with employees to speed up and simplify tasks. Ultimately, the employee is still responsible for interpreting the data and reaching a conclusion (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Faraj et al., 2018; Jo & Park, 2023; Kellogg et al., 2020). Employees tend to use workplace AI despite the risks and uncertainties that come with it due to the demanding nature of work (Daly et al., 2025; He et al., 2023; Jetha et al., 2025; Kar & Kushwaha, 2021). Furthermore, employees must determine how to integrate the assistance of AI into their work. Because of this, employees must find a balance between using AI for assistance and relying on themselves for answers and reaching conclusions (Pereira et al., 2023; Soulami et al., 2024). The focus of recent studies has been how AI transforms and shapes the nature of work. Less research has focused on how the integration of AI into the workplace makes employees feel (Bankins et al., 2024; Soulami et al., 2024).

Trust in artificial intelligence

Trust has long been viewed as crucial for the integration of AI into business processes. In this context, trust is interpreted as the perception of reliability, competence, and/or predictability, as well as the instrumentality of an entity, i.e., a technology, in achieving an end. Trust also influences the intention and behavior related to its acceptance and use (Afroogh et al., 2024; Choung et al., 2022; Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Kelly et al., 2023). In the context of AI, it is usually posited that greater perception of reliability and/or instrumentality leads to greater intention and behavior to use AI (Cao et al., 2021; Duong et al., 2026; Kelley, 2022; Wu et al., 2011). Recent studies have shown that although users trust and rely on AI, they are conscious of its possible errors and shortcomings thereof. These users are concerned about the ethics and fairness of AI and who should be held responsible for AI's decisions and actions (Cheung & Ho, 2025; Figueroa-Armijos et al., 2022; Shrivastava, 2025; Valtonen et al., 2025). Trust has increasingly become situation- and context-dependent (Georganta & Ulfert, 2024; Ulfert et al., 2024). The trust and confidence employees place in AI have raised the question of how long AI can serve its purpose before employees recognize its limits and why they continue to use it. The extent to which and the ways in which employees address this dilemma are questions that remain largely unaddressed in the academy (Georganta & Ulfert, 2024; Ulfert et al., 2024).

Employee ambivalence and trust calibration

This tension between reliance on and skepticism toward AI is valuable for understanding attitudes toward AI at work. It is possible that employees may see the potential of AI while identifying and expressing concerns about potential issues. This situation has been described as the AI trust paradox. Here, the use of AI and the level of trust in AI do not necessarily correspond to each other (Asif et al., 2025; Georganta & Ulfert, 2024; Irgang et al., 2025; Kong et al., 2023). Rather, this situation may indicate that employees have appropriately assessed the level of trust they ought to have in AI. The level of trust is affected by the context, and especially by the type of job, risks, and the degree of supervision and accountability at work (Duong et al., 2026; Lu et al., 2025; Ulfert et al., 2024). It is also possible that reliance on AI is calibrated. Reliance on AI may be calibrated to be less than 100% (bounded reliance), and in some cases, reliance may be suspended (Lu et al., 2025; Ulfert et al., 2024). In this research, calibrated reliance is called "adaptive skepticism". In the same way, calibrated reliance and the suspension of trust may be addressed as "verification". This research addresses these ways of dealing with reliance on AI at work. The existence of adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification may describe a condition whereby employees of an organization perceive that AI is valuable and useful, but may also perceive that there are potential negative and unwanted consequences of using AI (Benk et al., 2024; Cheung & Ho, 2025; McGrath et al., 2025). Research has shown that employees can use adaptive skepticism to integrate AI into their work and on AI while retaining oversight (Benk et al., 2024; McGrath et al., 2025).

AI-assisted decision-making

AI-assisted decision-making presents a modern example of how employees integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into their work. AI provides suggestions and analysis, and employees evaluate the ideas to determine whether the analysis is accurate and adequate (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2023). This is particularly important if the decisions are going to negatively impact someone or if there is ambiguity and a lack of clear standards to evaluate the situation (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). The assessment may include an evaluation of AI recommendations and analysis. Verification may also include adjusting the recommendations to make them more precise and clear (Cheung & Ho, 2025; Vorm & Combs, 2022). The type and extent of verification are context-dependent. Employees in finance and other high accountability positions may verify recommendations more thoroughly than employees in creative or artistic positions (Einola & Khoreva, 2022; Wang & Hou, 2025). Negotiation between AI suggestions and employees' cognitive authority is likely to occur frequently (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Faraj et al., 2018). How employees experience this negotiation is not well documented.

Conceptual framework: Negotiated trust in workplace AI

Given these unresolved issues, this study uses Negotiated Trust in Workplace AI as a conceptual lens rather than treating negotiated trust as an established theory. The lens conceptualizes AI trust not as a stable psychological state, but as an ongoing organizational practice through which employees determine when, how, and to what extent to rely on AI under conditions of uncertainty. This perspective builds on research portraying AI trust as dynamic, context-sensitive, and continuously managed through interaction and evaluation (Georganta & Ulfert, 2024; Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Ulfert et al., 2024). The three practices were specified as an interpretive conceptual lens to organize the study's theoretical perspective, but they were not used as predetermined coding categories. The empirical analysis remained open to participants' accounts and began with inductive coding. The lens therefore sensitized the analysis to three interconnected practices: Adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification, without restricting the initial coding process.

Three practices are intertwined in how employees manage their dependence on AI at work. These are adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification (McGrath et al., 2025; Ulfert et al., 2024). Adaptive skepticism refers to situations in which employees do not unquestioningly accept what AI suggests (Cheung & Ho, 2025; McGrath et al., 2025). Bounded reliance refers to situations in which employees allow AI to suggest options, but ultimately retain their own judgment (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Man Tang et al., 2022). Verification refers to the process by which employees determine whether to rely on or trust a suggestion generated by AI (Cheung & Ho, 2025; Vorm & Combs, 2022). Functional ambivalence refers to situations in which employees recognize the positive influence AI has on employees' productivity at work. The AI trust paradox refers to situations in which employees recognize the risks associated with the use of AI and the potential adverse effects AI has on employees' autonomy at work (Asif et al., 2025; Irgang et al., 2025; Kong et al., 2023). The AI trust paradox describes how employees manage AI use in the workplace. This framework focuses on managed epistemics. This means that employees retain control over the extent of knowledge and the decisions AI informs in the workplace (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2023). The goal of the framework is to motivate researchers to explore how employees integrate skepticism, verification, reliance, and trust into the use of AI at work, and to shift the focus away from employees' overall acceptance of AI at work.

Methodology

Research design

Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study examines how employees work and make decisions with AI in the presence of uncertainty and ambivalence. Phenomenology allows for the study of how employees engage with AI to help researchers understand untested assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study used a phenomenological approach to identify and describe the various experiences employees have with different AI tools, including how employees integrate AI tools into their work. The focus of the study was interpreting experiences with workplace AI, rather than formalizing assumptions about workplace AI (Neubauer et al., 2019). Overall, the study remained attentive to the experiences of participants to better define the workplace AI phenomenon. This study examines workplace AI to better understand employees' socio-cognitive practices and the mechanisms employees use to conduct their work. The study recognizes that employees use AI to assist them with workplace activities and decision-making and, in some cases, assess the situation and context in which they should exercise professional judgment (Bankins et al., 2024; Budhwar et al., 2022; Faraj et al., 2018).

Participants and sampling

The study involved 26 employees from public and private organizations across seven occupational sectors: education, government and public services, human resources, marketing and business development, administration and operations, healthcare, and technology and startup organizations. Purposive sampling with a maximum variation strategy was employed to capture differences in occupational roles, organizational contexts, and patterns of workplace AI use. Participants were eligible if they had at least one year of formal employment experience, actively used AI for work-related tasks, had experience using AI for task execution or decision-making, were able to reflect on their AI-related experiences, and provided informed consent. Sampling focused on obtaining sufficient depth and variation in experiential accounts to address the research question and develop coherent interpretive themes. The sample was closed when subsequent interviews no longer provided substantially new insights relevant to the study objectives, while the richness and relevance of participants' accounts remained sufficient to support coherent interpretation. This assessment served as a practical basis for determining sample adequacy rather than a fixed numerical saturation threshold (Guest et al., 2020).

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online and offline, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and followed a flexible interview protocol designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences without imposing predetermined interpretations (Callari & Puppione, 2025; DeJonckheere et al., 2024; Sukumaran et al., 2026). Interview

questions explored everyday AI use, experiences of trust and skepticism, reliance on AI under uncertainty, AI involvement in workplace decision-making, verification practices, and perceived effects on professional roles and work practices. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. During manuscript preparation, the research team translated the English quotations presented in this article from the original Indonesian transcripts, with direct reference to the original transcripts to preserve intended meaning and context. No formal back-translation or independent translation check was conducted. Participants were assigned coded identifiers (P1–P26), and identifying organizational information was removed during transcription and reporting.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following an iterative interpretive process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis began with repeated readings of transcripts to become familiar with participants' accounts, followed by inductive coding of meaningful experiential segments. Codes were subsequently compared, clustered, and developed into candidate themes by examining relationships and recurring patterns across the dataset. Themes were reviewed against the transcripts and refined to ensure internal coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research question before being defined and named. This process resulted in six empirically grounded themes. These themes emerged through inductive coding, without using the three practices as predetermined coding categories. Only after the empirical themes had been developed were they interpreted in relation to three recurring workplace practices: adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification, as well as the emergent condition of functional ambivalence. Thus, the analysis progressed from inductive coding to the development of six empirical themes, which were then interpreted in relation to three recurring workplace practices and the emergent condition of functional ambivalence. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to document analytical decisions, emerging interpretations, and researcher reflections. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking of preliminary interpretations, peer debriefing, an audit trail documenting coding and theme development, and continuous reflexivity regarding the researcher's positionality and interpretive influence (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical considerations

Participants were informed about the study's goals, procedures, and formats to ensure their confidentiality and to explain their right to withdraw. The interviews were designed to explore participants' workplace experience-related questions in a manner that was as non-judgmental and non-threatening as possible. The researcher secured the data, and only the researcher had access to them. The researcher reported the data in a manner that ensured participants' anonymity and that organization-related identifying information was removed.

Results

Participant profile

The research was based on 26 employees working at management, professional, and executive levels in seven different sectors: education and training, public and civil services, marketing and business, human resources, administration and operations, healthcare and social services, and information technology and communication. The participants disclosed using different types of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in connection with work to prepare reports, presentations, and other work documents; generate suggestions and recommendations; and aid their work communications and other activities. Additional details about the participants are provided in Table I.

Professional Sector	<i>n</i> (%)
Education	3 (11.5)
Government & Public Sector	6 (23.1)
Human Resources	2 (7.7)
Marketing & Business Development	4 (15.4)
Administration & Operations	4 (15.4)
Healthcare	2 (7.7)
Technology & Startup	5 (19.2)
Total	26 (100.0)

Participants discussed how AI had the potential to optimize and control their work. AI was also described in a slightly more positive light as a tool that could increase productivity. However, concerns about AI, such as reliance on AI to complete tasks, lack of critical thinking and creativity, loss of originality, and loss of professionalism, were also described. The results are presented in six interconnected themes.

AI as an efficiency-enabling assistant rather than a replacement for human judgment

Participants consistently believed that AI functions best as an aid to help complete tasks and make decisions. Participants explained that AI helped them become more efficient and effective at work by speeding up, simplifying, and organizing their work. AI suggested creative solutions to problems. However, participants ultimately determined the validity of suggestions and made the decisions.

One marketing participant explained:

"I think AI helps me generate a lot of potential solutions to a problem. But ultimately I have to select and determine the best solution." (P12)

In another case, an HR participant stated:

"Sometimes, suggestions are contrary to the organizational strategy, so I cannot simply accept the recommendations and apply them." (P7)

No consistent differences across occupational contexts were established, although some tentative contextual variations were observed. It was widely believed that emotional and situational elements could not be modeled by AI. Therefore, participants across all professions evaluated the recommendations generated by AI to determine whether, how, and to what extent they should be adapted to a given case to be of any use.

Simultaneous trust and skepticism toward AI outputs

Participants did not say they fully trusted AI or fully distrusted AI. Participants said they relied on AI while looking for flaws. Some participants said they fully trusted AI to find answers to common questions. However, a participant said they partially trusted AI. The participants said they partially trusted AI because they were concerned that it might provide incorrect information.

One of the participants said: *"I trust the AI to come up with the answer around 80%. However, sometimes the AI gets information wrong."* (P2)

Another participant said:

"I feel that I still have to take responsibility to check if the AI is giving the correct information." (P9)

Although participants had uncertainties about AI, they said they still relied on AI. The participants said they could not fully rely on AI. The participants said that they could rely on AI to complete less important and less critical tasks. The participants said that they were less confident about AI, while it was doing a task that involved providing information that could negatively impact someone if it was incorrect.

Pragmatic reliance on AI under pressure and uncertainty

The participants associated AI use with deadlines, heavy workloads, multitasking, rapid responses, and information overload. Some participants described using AI when they were not even sure about the quality of the output.

One participant said:

"When assignments pile up and time is limited, I need fast answers, so I use AI even if I still doubt it." (P3)

Others described AI as a tool that helps them getting started with a task and organizing their thoughts. One participant said:

"AI helps with initiating faster than starting with nothing." (P14)

From the participant interviews, we saw that participants used AI even without high confidence in the AI's ability. In these interviews, doubt but constant usage was associated with heavy work demands. From the interviews, we do not see high confidence in the AI among the participants, but we do see AI as a tool that can be helpful in organizing and completing tasks.

Human verification and cross-checking as mechanisms of control

When using AI, participants reported needing to verify its outputs. Participants shared how they verified AI outputs in multiple ways, including comparing the outputs with their own understanding, other people, and/or existing data.

One participant stated:

"I always cross-check with my own understanding and am/or discuss with colleagues before using it." (P1)

An accounting participant similarly explained:

"I review and reconcile AI results to the underlying data and principles of accounting." (P16)

How much participants verified the AI outputs was dependent on the circumstances. Participants shared they verified AI outputs more when the outputs were going to be used to generate financial reports and/or communicate with the general public. Participants also shared that they were concerned about the potential impact AI had on their ability to think and work independently. For example, one participant shared:

"I feel like AI is assisting me, but at the same time I feel I am becoming more dependent on it and am losing my ability to generate my own ideas and thoughts." (P14)

It was clear to the researchers that participants verified the AI outputs, and that verification was a part of determining the role the AI outputs would play in participants' work.

Organizational and social contexts shaping AI usage

The participants' experiences showed that AI use is contextual and situationally dependent. It is shaped by workplace activities and the practices and standards of peers. Participants described how quickly the use of AI became commonplace and how it impacted their work. From the participants' descriptions, the use of AI is culturally bound to the workplace, and situational factors influence the use of AI. Research on employee and organizational climate (Jankelova et al., 2025) supports these interpretations. Various situational and contextual factors influenced employees' use of AI, even in the absence of management directives.

One participant observed:

"Although no one is explicitly telling us to use AI, everyone is encouraged to use work-related tools of this kind." (P10)

Participants also described observing colleagues using AI and perceiving technological adaptation as increasingly connected to workplace competence. Participants' accounts suggested some differences across occupational contexts. Participants from government, HR, and administrative settings described concerns about accuracy, confidentiality, compliance, and accountability, while participants from education and more creative-oriented roles emphasized originality, authenticity, and cognitive independence. Given the small number of participants within each sector, these observations are treated as tentative patterns within the present sample rather than general occupational differences.

Participants also identified the absence of clear organizational policies as a source of uncertainty (Silic et al., 2025). They expressed the need for clearer guidance regarding acceptable AI use, verification procedures, training, and responsibility for AI-assisted outputs.

Perceived risks of overdependence and underutilization of AI

Participants highlighted various issues related to over-reliance on AI as well the complete avoidance of the technology. Reliance on AI was found to negatively impact employees' critical thinking, creativity, and other cognitive skills. One participant expressed:

"If employees become too dependent on AI, they may lose critical thinking skills because they can get their answers to everything." (P9)

The study's participants acknowledged that a total refusal to incorporate AI would be inefficient and incompatible with today's technology. Participants favored incorporating AI and relying on it as a supporting technology. One participant stated:

"AI should not be the final decision maker." (P12)

From this perspective, participants agreed that AI should be used to assist and support employees to perform their jobs. This view was particularly applicable when Employees were required to exercise professional judgment and when a high level of originality and creativity was required. Participants felt that AI should not be relied on to perform tasks requiring a high degree of moral judgment. Participants' views on the proper use of AI are summarized in Table II.

Table II
Thematic structure of employees' negotiated trust in workplace AI

Empirical Theme	Empirical Meaning	Representative Evidence	Workplace Practice	Higher-Order Interpretation
Efficiency-enabling assistant	AI speeds tasks but does not replace judgment	"The final decision still comes from me." (P12)	Bounded reliance	Human authority remains central
Trust and skepticism	AI is used despite doubts about accuracy	"I trust AI around 80%, but I still search for other sources." (P2)	Adaptive skepticism	Trust and skepticism coexist
Pragmatic reliance	Pressure sustains AI use despite uncertainty	"I use AI even if I still doubt it." (P3)	Bounded reliance; adaptive skepticism	Utility sustains reliance
Verification and cross-checking	AI outputs are checked against other sources	"I always cross-check with my own understanding." (P1)	Verification	Human judgment re-authorizes outputs
Organizational and social context	Culture, peers, norms, and policies shape AI use	"The work rhythm encourages people to find tools that speed up work." (P10)	Context shaping practices	AI reliance is organizationally situated
Risks of overdependence	Employees balance dependence and rejection	"AI should be used proportionally, as a supporting tool." (P12)	Bounded reliance; adaptive skepticism	Appropriate reliance requires boundaries

Integrative findings: The AI trust paradox

The empirical themes identified in the research detail three approaches to managing reliance on AI at work: adaptive skepticism; bounded reliance; and verification. There was overlap between the three approaches. Employees' responses to the uncertainty at work caused by reliance on AI at work were contextual and dependent on a number of factors, including the nature of work, the demands of the job, the risks associated with the job, the circumstances of the employing organization, and the individual's professional judgment.

Skepticism, in this case, involves directing a healthy dose of scrutiny toward the outputs of AI at work. Employees did not become completely disengaged from the use of AI at work. A considerable body of workplace research shows that, in response to the pervasive use of AI at work, employees are quick to develop a critical eye toward AI and maintain a healthy level of professional skepticism. The various forms of reliance on AI at work remain bounded. Epistemic and decision-making authority in the workplace remains in the hands of employees. Employees deploy verification strategies, and in the process maintain a professional obligation to be accountable for work done by AI.

The simultaneous occurrence of the three processes mentioned above resulted in a condition that can best be described as functional ambivalence. For the participants, this condition resulted from the use of AI in a context where it accelerated and supported the achievement of a task, but where concerns about the quality of AI's output remained. The condition can best be characterized as an experiential state which develops when an employee uses AI in support of the achievement of a task. The AI trust paradox encompasses the full range of emotions, from the more negative to the more positive emotions. Trust was neither promoted nor demoted. Negotiation best describes the condition. Employees evaluated and made a judgment about the risks associated with the use of AI in a given situation and determined what level of AI would be appropriate in support of the achievement of the task.

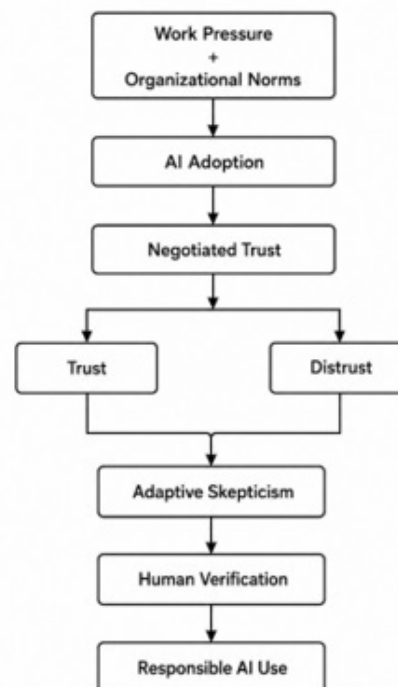


Fig. 1 Conceptual model of the AI trust paradox in workplace decision-making

Discussion

This research studies workplace AI as a process of negotiated trust, meaning employees decide how much trust to place in AI. The study found that different, competing pressures influence AI use. These include the need for efficiency and certainty, as well as professional judgment. It is trust, however, that employees continually negotiate. Rather than acting as the foundation for trust, AI use is defined by flexibility. Trust is recalibrated based on employees' decisions to rely on or question AI. Trust is also recalibrated based on employees' use of verification mechanisms. Focus is often placed on the level of trust employees place in AI. This research provides a different lens by focusing on how trust is managed (Zhang et al., 2026).

Negotiated trust as a process

The main idea is that trust in workplace AI is more fluid than a simple yes or no answer. The analysis showed three repeated practices within the workplace: adaptive skepticism and bounded reliance, as well as verification. While using workplace AI, employees were able to test the AI to check, whether it was drawing correct conclusions and to determine, if it was worthy of trust for a given task. Verification allowed workers to assess AI outputs before reaching a conclusion about trust. Employees were able to employ workplace AI to facilitate and increase their productivity, while being fully aware of the limitations of AI and the consequences that its use may have on their career. The analysis showed

numerous studies that illustrate trust in AI to be fluid and ever-changing. The authors of this study add to the body of research by providing examples of the practices employees use to calibrate trust in AI (Georganta & Ulfert, 2024; Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Ulfert et al., 2024).

Employees did not base their trust in AI on impersonal or abstract judgments. They weighed the nature of the task, the possible negative consequences of relying on AI, their own accountability, and the time available to them. For all of these reasons, reliance on AI to perform a given task could be deemed justified, and trust functioned as behavioral way of controlling uncertainty. In the absence of controlling factors, employees permitted higher levels of participation by AI. Employees relied on AI to perform higher-risk tasks only to the extent that their professional judgment permitted. This means that the relationship between trust and reliance is procedural and reciprocal; employees are continually adjusting the boundary beyond which reliance on AI is no longer permissible (Einola & Khoreva, 2022; McGrath et al., 2025; Ulfert et al., 2024).

Employees are not necessarily more reliant on AI because they trust it more. Employees use AI because it improves the speed and efficiency of job-related tasks, and employees may have justified mistrust or uncertainty regarding AI's recommendations (Cheung & Ho, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2026; Vorm & Combs, 2022). Thus, reliance on AI to perform workplace tasks does not necessarily mean that employees' uncertainty regarding AI has been eliminated.

Verification as epistemic re-authorization

This research provides an important perspective on verification as an epistemic process of re-authorization. Employees in the participating organizations did not validate AI outputs merely for correctness. They assessed the quality of AI outputs through fact-checking and challenged AI outputs through comparisons with external sources. They integrated their professional judgment and context to determine the legitimacy of AI outputs and the work-related information generated by AI. This research provides important insights about human judgment in integrating AI in the workplace. It provides additional organizational insights beyond the studies cited herein. The cited studies focused mainly on the ethical and legal implications of employing AI in the workplace (Stahl et al., 2022). This research complements those studies by examining the role of human judgment in integrating AI in the workplace to re-authorize the organization's work-related information. Employees of participating organizations verified AI-generated work-related information and outputs to determine, whether the information and outputs warranted professional defense (Cheung & Ho, 2025; Kellogg et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2025).

Verification builds a co-validation loop with AI. Employees add context and make the final call while AI generates and processes information. This loop can speed up processes (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). There are ethical consequences to using AI at work. Employees must take responsibility when the output of an AI tool adversely affects someone's professional reputation or when an AI tool generates information that adversely affects the institution. Using AI does not mean that employees are not accountable. There are consequences to using AI that contribute to a paradox of trust. This means that to build trust, employees cannot simply accept outputs generated by AI. Employees must be able to verify that the AI is not making grievous errors. This does not mean that AI is infallible or that employees are responsible for the consequences of relying on it. Rather, employees must be able to verify the information to establish and maintain trust. Relying on AI does not always mean that employees are shifting their responsibility to the machine (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2025).

Bounded reliance and functional ambivalence

The study found that employee behavior was more aligned with bounded reliance than with uniform reliance. Employees used AI if it increased productivity, but only to a certain extent. They drew the line at tasks requiring experience, knowledge, creativity, and/or responsibility. This supports other studies showing that AI is more likely to replace part of a job and augment the remainder (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2023). Bounded reliance consists of redefining the division of cognitive tasks between humans and AI. Employees defer to for assistance in interpreting and integrating information, but ultimately retain the final say (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Man Tang et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2023). Thus, true collaboration between humans and AI should be assessed by whether the right level of dependence is granted to AI. On the other hand, relying on AI to the fullest extent possible should not be the objective.

The coexistence of the advantages and restrictions of AI in the workplace may help explain the development of functional ambivalence described by the study participants (Kim et al., 2025). Employees in this study saw AI as a benefit and as a threat. The former was related to increased work speed and a reduction of effort in mental work. The latter was related to a loss of employees' critical thinking, creativity, and accountability. A similar situation in the workplace necessitates that employees adapt to the organizational requirements for productivity and accountability (Bankins et al., 2024; Mirbabaie et al., 2022). AI plays an integral role in organizational processes and procedures to increase work speed. However, the increased reliance on AI creates an organizational risk if the outputs are incorrect or inappropriate. Employees trust and use AI in the work process, and in some cases, their distrust of AI may be justified. Trust and distrust may coexist in the same work process.

The occupational differences observed in the present sample should be interpreted as tentative and exploratory, not as general occupational patterns. Risk-sensitive occupations may involve stronger attention to verification because errors can have professional or institutional consequences, whereas educational and creative contexts may place greater emphasis on originality, authenticity, and cognitive autonomy (Einola & Khoreva, 2022; Wang & Hou, 2025). However, these observations are based on small sectoral subgroups and therefore do not support broad comparisons across occupations. They are better understood as context-specific indications that warrant further investigation with larger, more balanced occupational samples.

Theoretical and Organizational Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate how employees built trust in AI systems and the boundaries they set in human-AI collaboration. The findings indicate that trust in AI may be represented as a type of epistemic instability that employees are able to manage. Instead of trust developing in a linear progression from no trust to full trust, employees showed signs of cyclical AI trust, in which the process became more complicated, and included a number of phases, including reliance on AI, uncertainty, and skepticism. These findings indicate that in the process of human-AI collaboration, trust and distrust may merge to facilitate the control of the extent of collaboration.

The originality of the research therefore lies in the fact that trust has been considered as part of the practice rather than a part of context of the adoption of AI. The three practices isolated in this work, bounded reliance, adaptive skepticism, and verification, lead to the regulation of AI authority by employees. The co-presence of these practices leads to the state of functional ambivalence, which signifies that the employees acknowledge that AI has limits but can be productive in the process. The research advances the field of the management of human-AI partnerships by elucidating active trust management (Kong et al., 2023; McGrath et al., 2025; Ulfert et al., 2024). The trust in AI should not be mechanistic, and employees should retain epistemic and decisional authority. Trust in AI should be dynamic and depend on the nature of the work. A strong case has been made for augmenting employee trust in AI by integrating additional controls and/or editing functions. This suggests that, alongside trust in AI, employees should not lose their ability to evaluate situations, make judgements, and take decisions based on their experience and ethical values. Human-in-the-loop should be implemented in AI to take decisional and epistemic authority in critical and sensitive work, especially in industry.

Verification cannot be 100% on the user. There need to be clear policies on when AI can be used, when users must verify for themselves, and when to consider non-AI solutions. Managers have to understand that increasing company productivity goals may drive a workplace more reliant on AI. There must be a balance of user judgment, organizational policy, and responsibility in conjunction with the advancement of AI. The study made it clear that the main concern when incorporating AI in the workplace is not whether employees trust AI, but rather how employees draw limits in partnership with AI. Trust is a good starting point, but employees may be willing to partner more closely with AI than Management may think. Understanding these limits may help Management develop ways for employees to take responsibility in the partnership with AI.

Theoretical contribution: AI trust as managed epistemic instability

This study's primary theoretical contribution is its conceptualization of AI trust as situational, negotiated, and ambivalent rather than a binary condition of trust or distrust. Across the six empirical themes, three recurring workplace practices- adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification- were identified at the interpretive stage as a way of organizing the empirical patterns. Their simultaneous enactment generated an emergent condition of functional ambivalence, whereby employees recognized AI's usefulness while remaining attentive to its limitations and consequences. At a higher level of theoretical abstraction, this pattern is conceptualized as managed epistemic instability. This abstraction captures a condition in which employees do not eliminate uncertainty surrounding AI but continuously manage the boundaries of AI-generated knowledge and decision authority through skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification.

Practical and managerial implications

The study suggests that there are differences between how companies implement AI and the trust employees place in it. For companies to responsibly integrate AI, there need to be strategies to ensure employee awareness and control when AI is used in the workplace. Employees need to be educated on the potential effects of AI in the workplace, from biased results to a false sense of security. Also, employees need to be educated on the types of situations for which AI should not be relied on to reach a result. They also need to be controls in place to account for cases, where the AI has been used to reach a result that impacts a person's well-being or freedom. There need to be company standards for governing and verifying the results produced by AI. Some cases may require a final decision to be made by a person. This may include AI being used to reach a given result, followed by a person verifying the decision. It is imperative that employees be educated on how to determine when verification is required. There need to be balancing strategies in place to encourage employees to exercise a duty of care when making decisions, particularly when the company has instituted strategies to reduce employee reliance on AI.

Limitations and future research

The study has a number of limitations. The first related to the 26 case study employees. Although the study describes a number of interesting cases, statistical conclusions are not supported. It would be interesting for future research to study the adaptive skepticism and bounded reliance described, as well as the type of verification performed, within different and larger employee populations. The second limitation is that the participants worked in different professions within different organizations in Indonesia. Thus, the levels of trust and verification involving AI differ throughout the case study. There are differing practices of trust within the same AI system based on business and national laws and regulations. Future research should explore why trust in an AI system within the workplace is based on negotiations. Lastly, the study is focused on one point

in time to describe the trust and reliance employees feel and demonstrate toward workplace AI. Future research should explore the changing nature of this trust and reliance. Research should also explore the balance of trust and reliance within the workplace.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that workplace AI use is better understood as a process of negotiated trust than as a simple choice between technological acceptance and rejection. Employees rely on AI for efficiency while simultaneously questioning its accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and potential consequences. Three core practices characterize this relationship: adaptive skepticism, bounded reliance, and verification. Their simultaneous enactment generates an emergent condition of functional ambivalence, in which employees recognize AI's efficiency benefits while remaining attentive to its accuracy, contextual appropriateness, originality, and accountability implications. Based on these findings, the study conceptualizes AI trust as managed epistemic instability. This perspective extends conventional trust–adoption perspectives toward an understanding of trust as an ongoing organizational practice. This perspective highlights that effective human–AI collaboration depends not on maximizing trust, but on maintaining appropriate boundaries between technological assistance and human authority. For organizations, this means that clear governance, verification standards, critical AI literacy, and accountability mechanisms should accompany AI implementation. Ultimately, responsible AI use requires organizations to capture AI's efficiency benefits while preserving employees' capacity to interpret, question, and remain accountable for consequential decisions.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article.

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Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the Faculty of Vocational Studies, Universitas Airlangga, under approval number 75.KKEP.5.2026.

Informed consent

We obtained informed consent from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data availability statement

The qualitative interview data are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable information and are subject to confidentiality and ethical restrictions. Reasonable inquiries regarding the data may be directed to the corresponding author, subject to applicable ethical and confidentiality requirements.

Author contributions

Author 1 contributed substantially to the conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, writing original draft, writing review and editing, and project administration. Authors 2, 3, 4, and 5 contributed to manuscript development, interpretation of findings, and writing review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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