BUSINESS FOCUS

AI reshaping China's workforce

Cutting-edge tech has generated new professions, lowered the threshold for starting a business, and empowered employees to upgrade their skills

BEIJING — The widespread rise of artificial intelligence is modifying China's labor market in ways that go far beyond job replacement or creation.

It has generated new professions, lowered the threshold for starting a business and empowered employees to upgrade their skills in a bid to stay competitive.

At Xunfei Healthcare's office in Hefei, capital of East China's Anhui province, Hu Pingping, a former doctor specializing in stomach and gut diseases, spends her days analyzing how a medical large language model diagnoses complex cases. Having transitioned into an AI trainer five years ago, her new profession merges clinical expertise with cutting-edge AI technology.

This shift also mirrors a broader evolution within China's professional landscape. As AI integrates into every sector, there has been a rapid emergence of new roles like AI content annotator, AI product manager and AI-assisted animator.

According to PwC's 2025 Global AI Jobs Barometer, nearly all AI-related positions are increasing globally, and workers with AI skills command a wage premium of 56 percent, up 25 percent from the previous year.

Data from online recruitment platform Zhaopin show that in the fourth quarter of 2025, job openings in China's AI sector grew by 19 percent year-on-year, led by algorithm engineers, machine vision specialists and robotics algorithm developers.

"AI is pushing the labor force toward higher value-added roles centered on human-machine synergy and intelligent augmentation," said Liu Cong, head of Chinese AI firm iFLYTEK's research institute.

With humanoid robots joining production lines, smart equipment running through farmlands, and AI models increasing work efficiency in newsrooms, there are also concerns about AI being a potential job killer.

The fast iteration of AI technology is shortening career lifecycles and challenging the traditional idea of "mastering one skill for a lifetime", with some workers finding it hard to transition into new professions.

Industry experts say in this context, accelerating the renewal of knowledge and skills to meet the demands of new technologies and changes in the labor market has become crucial.

This wave is reaching the legendary Hanzheng Street, a 500-year-old commercial center located in Central China's Wuhan, known as the first small commodity market run by self-employed and private businesses after China's reform and opening up in 1978. An AI training session in January this year attracted over 50 local apparel business owners to this area in the capital city of Hubei province.

Top: A humanoid robot demonstrates its skill of folding clothes at the 2025 World Internet Conference Light of Internet Expo in Wuzhen, Zhejiang province, on Nov 6.
HUANG ZONGZHI / XINHUA

Above: A visitor experiences an AI image generation function of HiDream.ai, a high-tech startup focusing on generative intelligence for creativity, in Hefei, Anhui province, on July 2.
ZHANG CHENG / XINHUA

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"The enthusiasm was incredible," said Wang Ruijue, the AI training program organizer, pointing to late-night sign-ups in his WeChat group. Attendees ranged from post-2000s designers seeking to update their traditional craft to veterans born in the 1970s, one of whom brought a postgraduate daughter along to assist with learning how to use this new tool.

Yang Jian, a fashion designer-turned AI entrepreneur, served as their instructor. He sees AI as a "super tool" in revolutionizing the apparel chain, from design and manufacturing to marketing.

Since large apparel enterprises are already mature in terms of AI adoption, Yang has dedicated his efforts to helping small and medium-sized firms use AI to improve their businesses.

On this old street in Wuhan, both tech-savvy youth and middle-aged business owners are now joining the AI learning journey, embracing not just a new tool for work but a new culture of lifelong learning.

AI, notably, is also lowering entrepreneurial barriers in China.

An example is the rise of one-person company (OPC), where individuals leverage AI tools for content creation, operations and service delivery. Cities like Suzhou in East China's Jiangsu province are promoting themselves as OPC-friendly hubs.

Industry insiders believe that this OPC rise is mainly driven by widespread adoption of AI technology, supportive local policies and platforms, and a growing talent pool.

Wei Qing, Microsoft China's chief technology officer, said that as AI becomes as commonplace as electricity and the telephone, using it to launch ventures and solve real-world problems is turning into an essential skill. Also, evolving applications like AI agents are making it possible for "one person to function like a full team".

With AI generating content at staggering speeds, one could be tempted to question if anything remains uniquely human in today's workplace. Experts respond to such musings by pointing to imagination, aesthetic sense, critical thinking and emotional intelligence as irreplaceable human advantages.

A "slash career", which refers to a working life revolving around multiple professions, will be important for future employment, said Zhang Junping, a professor at Shanghai-based Fudan University.

"Employees must avoid relying on a single skill or a single profession," Zhang explained, adding that since AI shortens the path from novice to expert, people have to develop comprehensive capabilities to enhance their capacity to withstand risks in terms of employment.

Zhang suggested including "AI thinking" in youth education, but at the same time also cautioned against "overreliance on AI", stressing that priority should be given to exercising independent learning and cultivating unique imagination.

China's national initiative, known as "AI Plus", proposes support for AI skills training to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship, while also boosting the potential to secure reemployment. Departments including the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology also issued a document outlining measures such as conducting forecasts for talent demand in the AI industry, releasing talent demand forecast reports, and supporting higher education institutions in planning and optimizing relevant disciplines and programs.

Minister of Human Resources and Social Security Wang Xiaoping said China will accelerate efforts to build a monitoring, early-warning and response system for AI's impact on employment and follow an employment-friendly technology development path.

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Tech giants jockey for super AI gateways in festival campaign

BEIJING — China's technology titans are leveraging the Chinese New Year holiday season to secure users for their intelligent assistants, betting that 2026 will be the year when "AI agents" evolve from novelties into indispensable daily tools.

This high-stakes race, not only for user attention but also for control over the next-generation artificial intelligence gateway, was ignited by their digital cash incentives.

Tencent kicked off a 1-billion-yuan ($144.05 million) giveaway on Sunday, offering users a chance to win up to 10,000 yuan through its AI-enabled Yuanbao app. That same day, at least 16 users claimed the top prize, propelling the app, powered by AI models such as DeepSeek, to first place in the free Chinese app rankings on Apple's App Store.

Not to be outdone, Alibaba's flagship AI product Qwen followed on Monday, poised to offer a 3-billion-yuan "festival treat", starting from Feb 6, to subsidize commodities, dining, travel and entertainment bookings, all within a unified, AI-powered shopping ecosystem. This big tech's holiday-season generosity also involves directing traffic to its dedicated healthcare AI app, named Ant Afu.

Two other heavyweight rivals, ByteDance and Baidu, meanwhile, are running promotional campaigns tied to the widely-watched holiday television galas.

This marketing blitz echoes the country's fierce battle for digital payment gateways over a decade ago. Only this time, the prize is the next game-changer, one expected to be capable of end-to-end task execution, thus making AI the primary portal for everything from ordering coffee to booking holidays.

A recent industry report sees 2026 as a key strategic juncture for China's internet giants, amid growing consumer AI investment and fierce competition to create all-encompassing AI gateways.

"On-device AI agents could make traditional apps gradually fade into the background," said Chen Jianguang, a partner at EY Greater China. He explained that phone-based AI agents will automate tasks based on user data with no app opening required.

In Qwen's chatbot, for example, a simple message like "I want to watch a movie nearby" automatically handles cinema recommendations, booking and payment via Taopiaopiao and Alipay, all within one interface.

"Once an operating-system-level AI agent gains control over traffic distribution, it will become the new gatekeeper of user access," said Sang Jitao, a professor at Beijing Jiaotong University.

This competition comes amid dual powerful dynamics: the government's drive to expand domestic consumption and the AI industry's quest for viable commercial pathways.

China's vast digital population is fueling this economic sector with remarkable potential. The country's generative AI user base had reached 515 million by June 2025, doubling in just six months, while its mobile AI users stood at 720 million by October last year.

"Our AI market is projected to grow at a rate exceeding 30 percent in 2026," said Liu Lichao, an AI analyst at CCID Consulting under China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

Yet, as DeepSeek's sudden rise a year ago made clear, securing sustainable corporate advantage requires more than just subsidizing user growth alone. A broader industry truth is that long-term success hinges on a decisive shift toward genuine innovation and delivering tangible gains in efficiency.

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In January, leading Chinese AI developers unveiled a new wave of smarter models, ranging from Qwen to Kimi and DeepSeek. Rather than chasing top spots on leaderboards, the race has shifted to creating agents that truly understand context and solve real-life problems.

Chinese tech giants are starting to explore and sharpen their AI focuses: ByteDance's Doubao helps students with homework, Alibaba's Lingguang AI enables easy mini-program creation, and e-commerce platforms like JD.com are deploying digital avatars for live commerce.

Pony Ma, chairman and CEO of Tencent, noted that a one-size-fits-all "AI suite" may not be what users truly want, calling instead for an ecosystem designed around individual needs and privacy.

Now, the one-person company (OPC) model is rapidly emerging in China, fueled by the coding capabilities of large AI models and support from local governments, resulting in a greater diversity of products.

In this low-cost form of entrepreneurship, a solo founder uses AI tools to handle content creation, product operations and service delivery, succeeding by precisely identifying a niche need and delivering an effective solution.

"In 2026, AI will further advance from model innovation to real-world applications, driving a measurable increase in overall productivity," said Ma Beibei, a CCID researcher.

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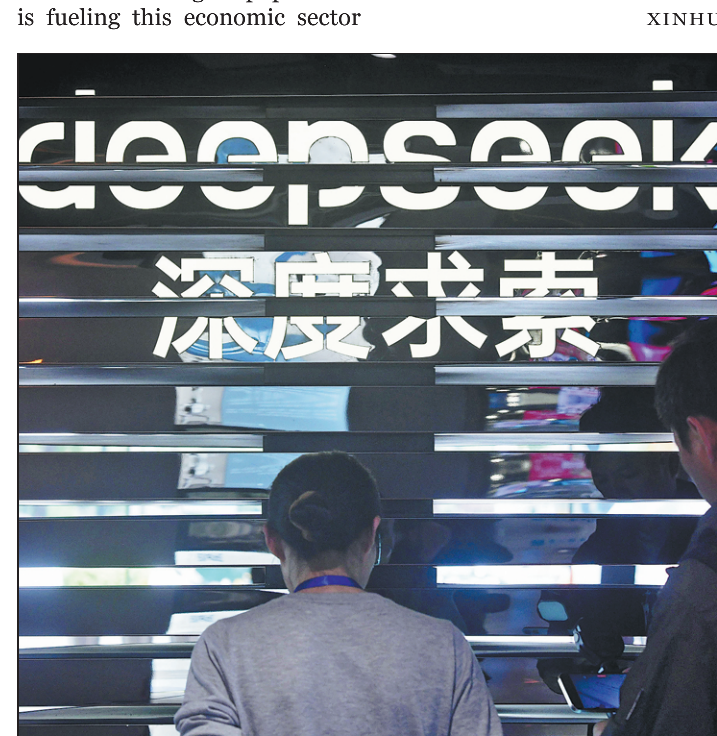

People learn about AI model DeepSeek at a fair themed on AI technologies in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, on May 4.
LONG WEI / FOR CHINA DAILY