OpenAI

Work at the Frontier: How AI is changing the shape of freelance work

Key takeaways from a joint report by OpenAI and Upwork

OpenAI Economic Research

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Key takeaways

In *The Rebundling of Freelance Work in the AI Age*, OpenAI and Upwork compare tasks in a sample of personal and work-related ChatGPT conversations with the projects clients post on Upwork. The authors also examine which tasks clients combine and how the scope of AI-related projects differs from other freelance work.

01 The mix of work clients seek on Upwork is changing. AI-related postings also bring together a larger share of task pairs that were historically uncommon.

02 For similar work posted in the same month, fixed-price budgets are 52% higher for AI-related jobs. On hired hourly contracts, freelancers log 41% more hours on AI-related work in the first 90 days.

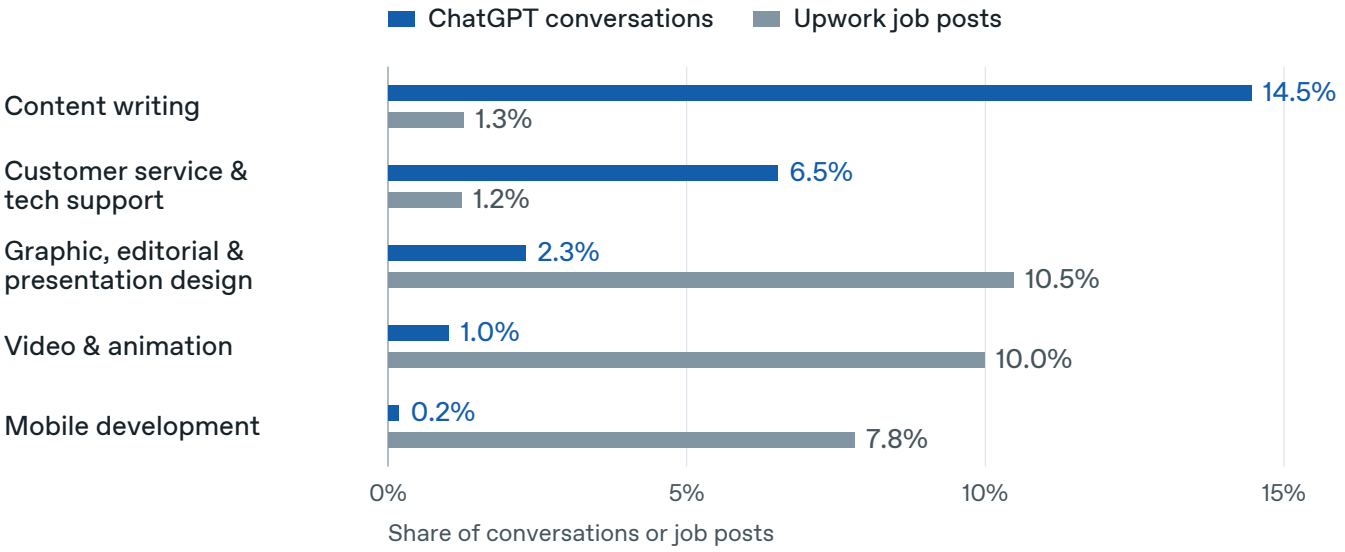
AI use is widespread at work, but its effects remain difficult to detect in aggregate economic statistics. Data from freelance platforms may provide early evidence that work is changing by documenting trends in the types of jobs clients post and the activities those jobs involve. The faster pace of freelance work can make these trends visible sooner: contracts are typically short, hiring is streamlined, and clients can quickly adapt postings as their needs evolve.

AI use and freelance demand

The authors compare the work people do with ChatGPT with freelance job postings on Upwork. Some of the results follow an expected pattern: Content writing or customer tech support appear frequently in ChatGPT use and account for small shares of Upwork postings (Figure 1).

Figure 1

ChatGPT use and freelance demand have different mixes



Selected categories. ChatGPT: Jan 2025–Jun 2026, personal/work conversations matched to Upwork's taxonomy. Upwork: H1 2026 job posts.

Adapted from the OpenAI–Upwork report, Exhibit 2.1.

Content writing's share of Upwork postings fell by roughly 31% from the first six months of 2025 to the same period in 2026. Firms may be using AI directly for this task instead of hiring remote workers.

At the same time, many tasks that people could perform with AI still appear frequently in freelance postings. Although AI can assist with video production work, it is less common in ChatGPT use and remains common in Upwork postings.

These differences point to a broader gap between what AI systems can do and how people currently use them. OpenAI calls this gap the capability overhang.

Many tasks don't fit into either pattern. Graphic and presentation design, for example, are relatively common in both ChatGPT and Upwork data. Even if AI can perform many aspects of such a task, people still serve a valuable role. Graphic design is complex, and while people use AI commonly for image generation, freelance demand for graphic design remains substantial.

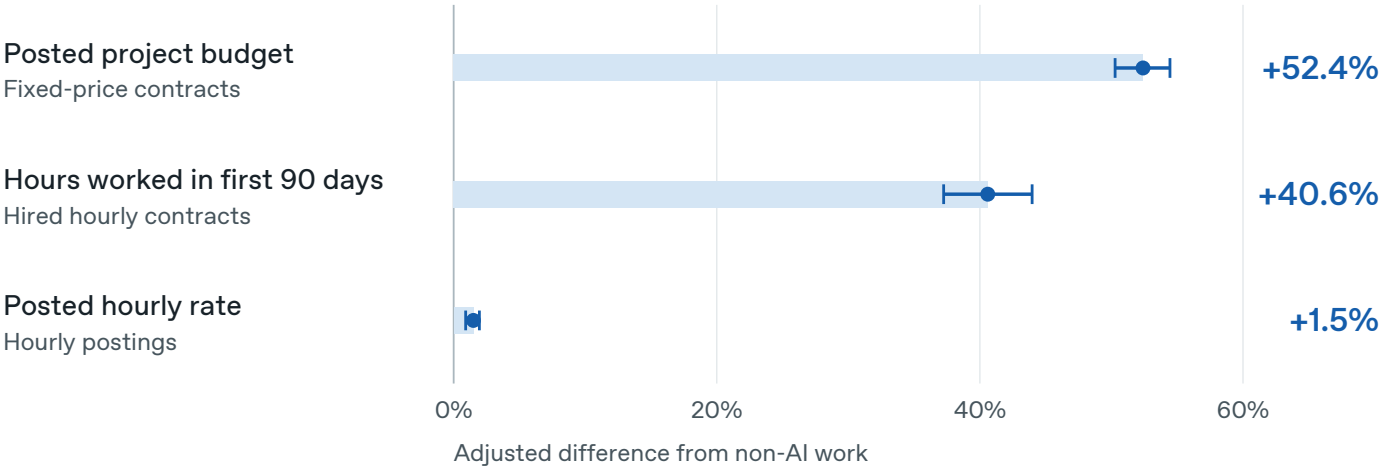
Project budgets and hours

AI-related jobs request AI skills, require AI tools, or involve improving AI-generated output. Upwork clients can post a fixed budget for a project or an hourly rate. Within the same work subcategory and posting month, posted fixed-price budgets were about 52% higher for AI-related projects (Figure 2).

The corresponding difference in posted hourly rates was 1.5%. Among hired hourly contracts with positive recorded hours, AI-related work involved about 41% more hours in the first 90 days. These patterns suggest that clients may commission larger projects when the work involves AI.

Figure 2

Larger budgets and more hours, with a small hourly-rate gap



Adjusted differences from non-AI work, controlling for work subcategory and posting month; observations through April 2026. Hours cover hired hourly contracts with positive recorded hours. Lines show 95% confidence intervals.

Adapted from the OpenAI–Upwork report, Exhibit 2.4.

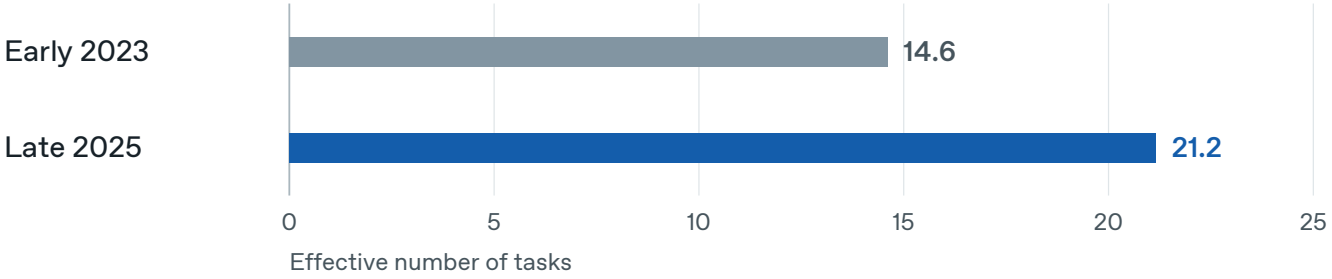
AI-related postings also contain slightly more distinct tasks on average: **3.35**, compared with **3.19** in other postings. A client might ask for AI-generated video alongside editing and motion graphics, or chatbot development alongside integration into an app.

The mix of tasks in AI-related work

The mix of tasks in AI-related postings broadened between early 2023 and late 2025. Task diversity rose by about 45% (Figure 3). Video production, social-media campaigns, marketing automation, and AI integration all gained share within AI-related work.

Figure 3

AI-related work is spreading across more activities



The effective number of tasks (1/HHI) is the number of equally common tasks that would produce the observed diversity. It reflects both the number of distinct tasks and how evenly they are represented. Early 2023 covers January–June; late 2025 covers July–December.

Adapted from the OpenAI–Upwork report, Exhibit 3.1, Panel A.

Clients also combined tasks in different ways within individual postings. Among postings with at least two tasks, historically uncommon pairs made up 8.4% of task pairs in the average AI-related posting and 2.4% in the average non-AI posting. These pairs had appeared together in fewer than 200 earlier postings (Exhibit 3.2, Panel A of the full report).

What this could mean for freelance work

Content writing's declining share of postings suggests that some clients may be using AI for work they previously commissioned from freelancers. That shift could put pressure on freelancers who specialize in writing.

AI may be changing the composition and scope of work without reducing overall labor demand, which could help explain why unemployment has not increased substantially. AI can reduce demand for some tasks while expanding what clients ask workers to deliver in others. When AI makes individual tasks easier, clients may ask for more: another version of a design, a more ambitious video, or an app with more features. Some of AI's effects on work may therefore show up first in the scope of projects clients post, the wages clients pay for those projects, and the tasks they ask freelancers to perform.

Full report

The Rebundling of Freelance Work in the AI Age. OpenAI and Upwork, November 2026.
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