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How AI Is Collapsing the Engineering Organization, and What It Means for the C-Suite

A briefing for CHROs, Chief Talent Officers, CIOs,
and CTOs

Introduction

Something fundamental is shifting in how technology organizations are structured, and most leadership teams are not yet calibrated to it. The question is no longer whether AI will change the operating model of engineering – it already has. The real question is whether the people functions, the CIO's office, and the broader C-suite are keeping pace with what is now an observable, measurable compression of roles, layers, and assumptions that have underpinned technology delivery for the past two decades.

Agile, and specifically Scrum, was designed for a world in which the bottleneck was coordination between humans writing code. Two-week sprints, story points, stand-ups, and retrospectives all exist to manage the

friction of human collaboration at scale. When AI agents can generate, test, and iterate code autonomously, and when engineers at firms like Anthropic and OpenAI report that AI now writes the entirety of their code [SF Standard, Feb 2026], the rationale for those rituals begins to erode. Not because collaboration is less important, but because the nature of what requires coordinating has fundamentally changed.

This whitepaper explores what we are observing across the market, what it means for the Scrum model and the product-engineering relationship, and why the implications for CHROs, CTOs, and CIOs are both urgent and structural.



1. The Engineering Organisation Is Being Compressed

The shift is not speculative. Since 2019, hiring of new graduates at the fifteen largest US technology companies has fallen by 55 percent [SignalFire, 2025]. AI-driven layoffs have accelerated at firms including Pinterest, Autodesk, Amazon, and Salesforce, with AI responsible for almost 55,000 US layoffs in 2025 alone [Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Dec 2025]. Engineers themselves describe a fundamental inversion: where they once spent roughly 80 percent of their time writing code and 20 percent on design, many now write almost no code at all [SF Standard, Feb 2026].

What is emerging in place of the traditional engineering team is something closer to an orchestration model. The engineer of 2026 spends less time writing foundational code and more time managing a portfolio of AI agents, reusable components, and external services [CIO.com, Feb 2026]. Their value lies in system architecture, defining objectives and guardrails for AI counterparts, and validating output for robustness, security, and alignment with business goals. The core competency becomes systems thinking, not syntax.

For CHROs and CTOs, this has immediate workforce planning implications. The traditional engineering pyramid of a large base of junior developers narrowing toward senior architects, is flattening into something closer to a diamond. The mass of the organization sits at the level of judgment and orchestration rather than at the level of code production.

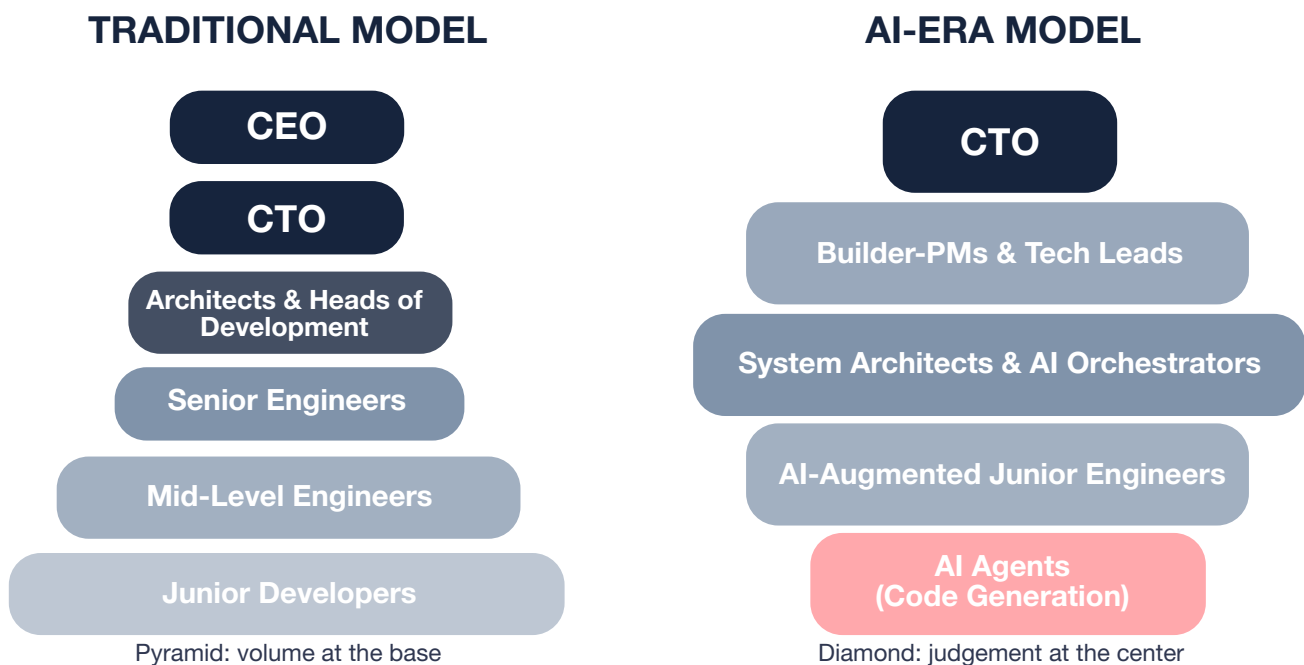


Figure 1: The engineering organisation shifts from a volume-based pyramid to a judgment-centered diamond.

But the compression is not just about headcount. It is breaking the career ladder itself. Companies are not simply laying people off; they are eliminating the entry points through which the next generation of senior engineers, architects, and technology leaders has always been developed. SignalFire's data shows a 50 percent decline in new role starts for people with less than one year of post-graduate experience at major tech firms between 2019 and 2024 [SignalFire / CNBC, Sep 2025]. US entry-level job postings fell 35 percent between January 2023 and June 2025, with AI-exposed roles hit hardest [Revelio Labs, 2025]. US programmer employment dropped 27.5 percent between 2023 and 2025 [IEEE Spectrum, Dec 2025]. The traditional "expert-novice" model of skill-building, where junior staff learn by doing low-stakes work alongside experienced colleagues and gradually ascend, is being hollowed out.

This is a slow-moving crisis with compounding consequences. If organizations eliminate the bottom rungs of the ladder while simultaneously demanding senior-level judgment from their remaining engineers, they are consuming their own talent pipeline. About 42 percent of global employers already expect talent availability to decline between 2025 and 2030 [World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025]. The CHRO who is not actively modelling what the engineering talent pipeline looks like in 2028 or 2029 – when the entry-level cohorts of today should be stepping into mid-career roles that may no longer exist – is storing up a structural problem that will be far more expensive to solve retrospectively.

2. The Scrum Model Under Pressure

Scrum was built for an era in which the cost of experimentation was high and the speed of iteration was constrained by human throughput. AI has challenged both of those assumptions simultaneously.

When code generation is near-instantaneous, the two-week sprint becomes an artificial constraint rather than a useful cadence. Designed to estimate human effort, story points lose their meaning when an AI agent can complete in minutes what previously took days. Leading practitioners are already proposing new estimation frameworks, including “zero-point” stories for fully automated tasks [Yuji Isobe, Medium, Jun 2025], acknowledging that the effort taxonomy underpinning Scrum no longer maps to reality.

The sprint review, traditionally a demonstration of working software, is evolving into something more strategic: a forum for sharing validated learnings and experimental outcomes, where a “failed” experiment that surfaces a crucial insight is considered a successful

sprint. This is a meaningful philosophical shift, from output measurement to outcome measurement. The Scrum Master role is under the most direct pressure. Framework expertise as a standalone value proposition is now a commodity [Scrum.org, Jan 2026]. If the only differentiator is the ability to explain sprint retrospective formats, AI has already commoditized that knowledge. Process facilitation without outcome ownership was always a weak position. AI makes it indefensible.

None of this means Agile principles are dead. If anything, the core tenets such as rapid iteration, empirical process control, customer feedback loops, become more important, not less. A 2025 Harvard Business School study of 776 professionals at Procter & Gamble found that individuals using AI matched the performance of entire teams without AI [Dell’Acqua et al., “The Cybernetic Teammate,” HBS Working Paper 25-043]. The principles work: it is the rituals and role structures that have solidified around them that are being fundamentally renegotiated.

3. The Product-Engineering Relationship Inverts

Perhaps the most consequential structural shift is in the relationship between product management and engineering. Historically, product defined what to build and engineering determined how and at what pace. The ratio was typically one product manager to four to six engineers, and the engineering team’s velocity was the constraint on delivery.

AI inverts this. When engineering velocity is no longer the bottleneck, product thinking becomes the constraint. Andrew Ng and others have suggested the developer-to-PM ratio could flip to 2:1 [Product School, Jan 2026]. The implication is that product managers who cannot move

at the speed of AI-augmented engineering will become the drag on the system, not the engineering team. This creates a new archetype: the “builder PM”. They can prototype directly using AI tools rather than writing specifications for others to implement. Product managers are increasingly expected to validate AI-generated outputs, co-own technical decisions, and operate with a level of technical literacy that was previously optional [LogRocket, Feb 2026]. The boundary between product and engineering is blurring in ways that challenge existing job architectures, career frameworks, and compensation structures.



4. The Convergence: Who Becomes What?

The blurring of product and engineering raises a question that every CHRO, CTO, and CIO will need to answer in the next twelve to twenty-four months: does talent flow from engineering into product, or from product into engineering?

The honest answer is both, but the dynamics, the gaps, and the interventions required are different in each direction.

Engineers Moving into Product

This is the more natural migration, and it is already underway. As AI absorbs the mechanical act of writing code, engineers are being pushed up the value chain toward decisions about what to build and why, which is, functionally, product management. Senior engineers have always had strong opinions about product direction; the difference now is that the organization needs them to own those opinions formally, not just voice them in sprint planning.

The gaps are predictable and addressable but should not be underestimated. Engineers moving into product roles typically need to develop competency in four areas.

First, customer empathy and discovery. They need to be able to sit with ambiguity, conduct qualitative research, and synthesize conflicting signals from users and stakeholders into a coherent problem statement. Second, commercial acumen. They must understand unit economics, go-to-market dynamics, pricing, and how product decisions translate into revenue and margin. Third, cross-functional influence, such as the political and persuasive skill of aligning design, sales, marketing, legal, and leadership around a shared roadmap without positional authority. Fourth, narrative and communication. They need to translate technical jargon into language that resonates with non-technical executives, customers, and boards.

Product Managers Moving into Engineering

This is the more disruptive migration, and it is being enabled directly by AI. When tools like Claude Code, Cursor, and Lovable allow a non-engineer to build functional prototypes, validate technical hypotheses, and ship working software, the traditional gatekeeping function of the engineering team is weakened. Product managers who can prototype are no longer dependent on engineering capacity to test their ideas as they can validate and iterate before a single engineer is involved.

The gaps here are different. Product managers moving toward engineering need to develop systems-level thinking. They must understand how components interact, where technical debt accumulates, and what architectural choices create downstream constraints. They need to build literacy in quality assurance, security, and scalability. These disciplines distinguish a working prototype from a production-grade system. The risk is that organizations mistake the ability to generate code for the ability to engineer software. These are not the same thing, and blending them will create technical debt, security vulnerabilities, and reliability problems that compound over time.

What We Expect to See

Our view is that the market will not settle on one direction. Instead, we expect to see the emergence of a new hybrid role, variously described as the “technical product builder,” the “product engineer,” or simply the “builder”. They draw from both disciplines and sits uncomfortably in neither traditional job family. Y Combinator’s Garry Tan has suggested that the title of software engineer itself may fade, replaced by “builder” or “product manager” [Y Combinator Podcast, Feb 2026].

The Product-Engineering Convergence

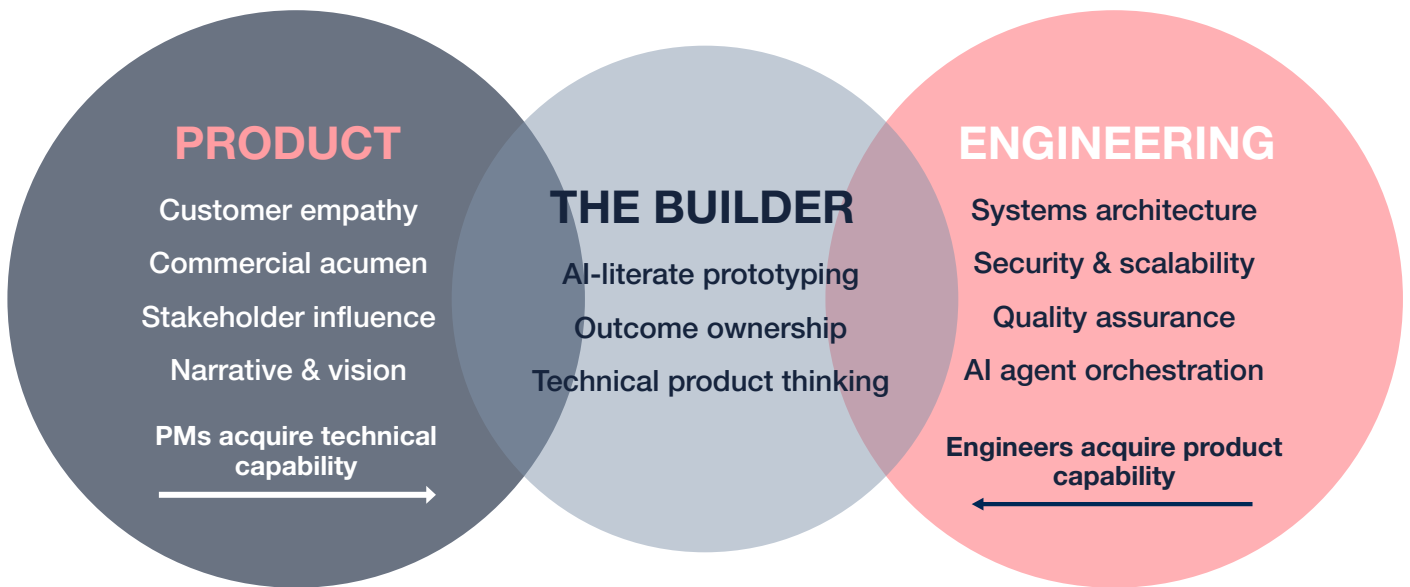


Figure 2: The emerging ‘Builder’ archetype sits at the intersection of product and engineering, drawing skills from both.

For CHROs and Chief Talent Officers, this creates several concrete imperatives. Job architectures and career frameworks designed around distinct product and engineering tracks will need to accommodate hybrid paths, or risk losing talent that does not see itself reflected in either ladder. Learning and development programmes will need to be reconfigured: engineers need structured exposure to customer discovery, commercial thinking, and stakeholder management; product managers need immersion in systems design, AI tooling, and technical evaluation. Compensation and levelling frameworks will need to account for a profile that creates value across the traditional boundary — and the market will price these builders at a premium. For CTOs and CIOs, the implication is equally direct: the organizational design that separates product and engineering into distinct reporting lines with distinct skill expectations is becoming a friction point. The most effective technology organizations in two to three years will be those that have deliberately designed for convergence.



5. The CIO Function at a Crossroads and the Reporting Line Question

The CIO role has been evolving for years, but AI is accelerating that evolution to the point of potential redefinition. The traditional CIO mandate of infrastructure stability, cybersecurity, cost discipline, vendor management remains relevant, but it is no longer sufficient.

What we are seeing across the market is a bifurcation. On one side, CIOs who are repositioning themselves as enterprise-wide AI orchestrators, moving from running internal platforms to building AI-powered products and services that generate revenue. IT is no longer one level removed from the customer, it is building the products [CIO.com, Jan 2026]. On the other side, CIOs who remain anchored to traditional operating models risk falling behind. The organizations that are scaling AI successfully are those where the CIO is redesigning what Deloitte has described as the “software factory” [Deloitte Tech Trends, Dec 2025]. This means not simply adding AI assistants, but fundamentally rethinking how software is built, tested, and delivered.

The CIO title itself is expanding as well. We are seeing CIOs described as Chief Information Technology Officers, or heads of Data, Digital, and Transformation. Compensation is rising accordingly, with retention bonuses increasingly tied to AI transformation milestones [CIO.com, Feb 2026]. The profile that boards and CEOs are seeking has shifted decisively toward “bilingual”

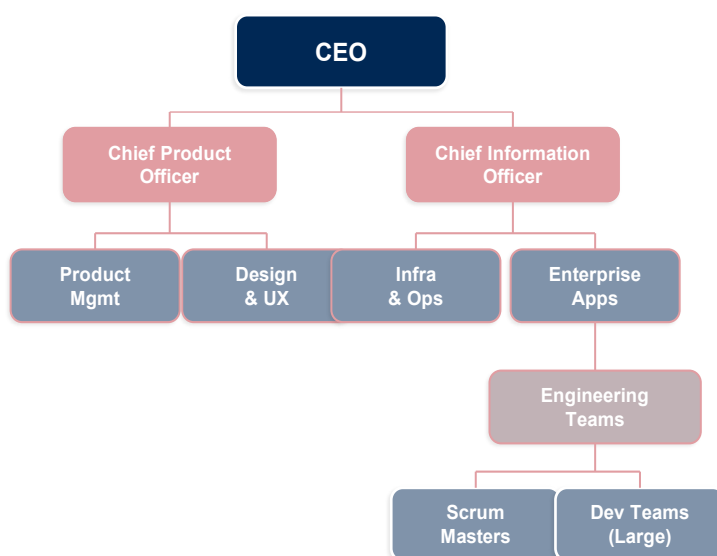
fluency: the ability to speak profit-and-loss to the board and architecture to the engineers. Seventy percent of CIOs now say their primary role with generative AI is either implementing it across the enterprise or evangelizing its possibilities [Deloitte Tech Executive Survey, 2025].

How This Changes the Reporting Structure

The convergence of AI, product, and engineering is creating direct pressure on the traditional separation of technology and product leadership. In the legacy model, a Chief Product Officer owned product management, design, and UX, while a Chief Information Officer owned infrastructure, enterprise applications, and engineering teams. Engineering sat beneath the CIO, with Scrum Masters and large development teams layered below. Product and engineering reported into different C-suite leaders with different mandates, different incentives, and different cadences.

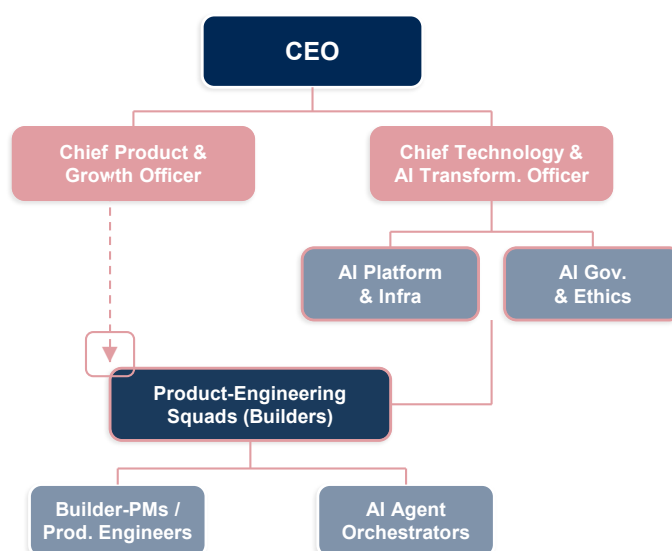
That model assumed a world in which product strategy and technology delivery were fundamentally separate disciplines. AI dissolves that assumption. When the infrastructure itself is intelligent, the organizational boundary between “defining what to build” and “building it” becomes artificial.

TRADITIONAL MODEL



Siloed functions
Product & Engineering report separately
CIO = cost center | CPO = strategy

AI-ERA MODEL



Converged leadership with matrix management
Integrated squads report to CTAIO (solid)
CPGO sets product direction (dotted)

Figure 3: From siloed CPO/CIO to a converged CTAIO + CPGO model with matrix-managed product-engineering squads.

SECTION FIVE

We are seeing several emerging patterns across the market. First, the replacement of the traditional CIO with a Chief Technology and AI Transformation Officer (CTAIO). This role consolidates infrastructure, engineering, AI platform, and AI governance under a single technology leader with a mandate that extends well beyond keeping the lights on. Second, the evolution of the Chief Product Officer into a Chief Product and Growth Officer (CPGO). They retain ownership of product strategy, customer insight, and growth, but concede direct management of engineering resources. Third, and critically, the introduction of matrix management for the product-engineering teams that sit at the center of delivery. These integrated “builder” teams report with a solid line to the CTAIO for technical delivery and AI orchestration, and a dotted line to the CPGO for product direction and growth strategy. This matrix reflects the reality that neither function can operate independently in an AI-native organization. Fourth, the elevation of AI governance, security, and ethics as a direct report to the CTAIO, sitting alongside (not beneath) the engineering and product teams.

For CIOs and CTOs, the strategic question is whether to lead this reorganization or be reorganized by it. The CIOs who are succeeding are those who have proactively expanded their mandate into product, data, and AI strategy, effectively absorbing responsibilities that previously sat with the CTO, CDO, or a separate Chief AI Officer. McKinsey’s Global Tech Agenda 2026 describes top CIOs as those who are rewiring their companies for growth and using AI and data to shape operating models [McKinsey, 2026]. Almost a third of CIOs say that orchestrating fellow technology leaders is now essential to their role [Deloitte, 2025].

For the CHRO, the implication is that the technology leadership succession pipeline needs to reflect this convergence. The next Group CIO or CTO will not be a pure infrastructure leader or a pure engineering leader, they will be someone who can operate across the full spectrum from AI platform architecture to product strategy to enterprise-wide change management. That profile is rare, and developing it requires deliberate, cross-functional career design that most organizations have not yet built.

6. Implications for the CHRO and Chief Talent Officer

The convergence of these trends creates a set of challenges that sit squarely in the CHRO's domain. These are not technology problems. They are people, structure, and culture problems that happen to be triggered by technology.

Organizational design: The compression of engineering layers, the blurring of product and engineering, and the expanding CIO mandate all require structural responses. Existing org charts, job families, and reporting lines may no longer reflect how work gets done. The traditional separation of product and engineering tracks is becoming a friction point that slows delivery and loses hybrid talent.

Workforce planning: The demand profile for technology talent is shifting from volume to judgment. Fewer engineers, but more senior. Fewer Scrum Masters, but more strategic programme leaders. Fewer traditional PMs, but more “builder” profiles who can operate across the product-engineering boundary. Meanwhile, the entry-level pipeline is being hollowed out, creating a medium-term succession crisis that must be planned for now.

Talent assessment and development: AI fluency is rapidly becoming a baseline expectation, not a differentiator. Demand for AI fluency in job postings grew nearly sevenfold in two years, with most of that demand in management and business roles [McKinsey, 2025]. Performance frameworks need to reflect this, and L&D programmes need to be reconfigured for the bidirectional flow of talent between product and engineering.

Change management: Most firms struggle to capture value from AI because of people, processes, and politics, not because the technology fails [Harvard Business Review, Nov 2025]. More than half of employers already regret their AI-attributed layoffs [Forrester Predictions 2026]. Block's experience of cutting 40 percent of its workforce in an AI-driven restructure, only to begin rehiring within weeks, is a high-profile illustration of what happens when workforce transformation outpaces workforce understanding. The CHRO is the natural owner of ensuring that AI-driven restructuring is precise, evidence-based, and reversible where necessary.

Leadership succession: The CIO, CTO, and CDO roles are converging around AI. Boards are seeking integrated technology leadership rather than siloed function heads. The next generation of technology leaders needs to be developed across the full spectrum. From platform architecture to product strategy to enterprise change management, the CHRO must be actively designing those career paths.

7. I'm an Engineer, What Are My Options?

If you are a software engineer reading this, or if you are a CHRO, CTO, or CIO trying to have an honest conversation with your engineering population about what comes next, the following is our view of where the career paths lead from here.

The central reality is this: the role of the software engineer as it has existed for the past two decades is being redefined. That does not mean engineering careers are over. It means the axis of value has shifted, from writing code to directing outcomes. The engineers who will thrive are those who move toward judgment, systems thinking, and business context. The engineers who remain anchored to code production as their primary identity will find that identity increasingly commoditized.

Five Career Paths for Engineers in the AI Era

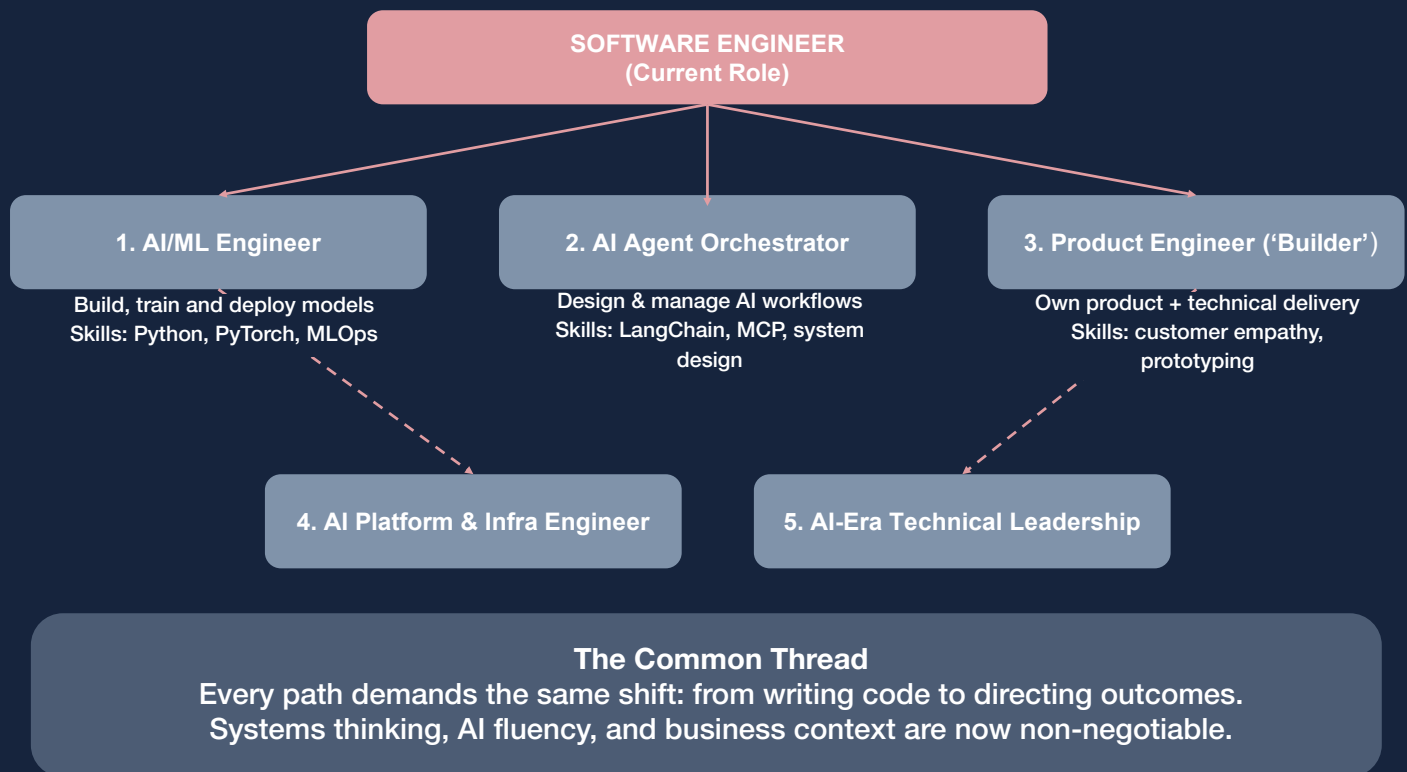


Figure 4: Five career paths for software engineers navigating the AI transition.

Path 1: AI / Machine Learning Engineer

This is the most direct technical pivot. AI engineers design, build, train, and deploy machine learning models into production systems. This role topped LinkedIn's fastest-growing jobs list for 2026 [LinkedIn Jobs on the Rise, Jan 2026], and median total compensation at major tech firms sits around \$245,000, with senior roles clearing \$350,000 to \$550,000 [Levels.fyi, 2026]. The transition timeline for a software engineer is typically six to nine months, with an 85 percent placement rate for those who commit to hands-on project work [Career transition analysis of 1,200+ pivoters, 2026]. The skills gap is learnable: Python depth, PyTorch or TensorFlow, MLOps, and cloud deployment. The harder shift is mindset.

Path 2: AI Agent Orchestrator

This is the genuinely new role that did not exist eighteen months ago. AI agent orchestrators design and manage the autonomous workflows that are replacing manual development processes. They select and combine models, manage inference pipelines, build guardrails, and ensure AI agents operate reliably at scale. The skill set blends traditional systems architecture with a deep understanding of agent frameworks like LangChain, CrewAI, and the Model Context Protocol (MCP). For experienced backend or platform engineers, this is a natural evolution that leverages existing strengths in system design while adding AI-native capabilities.

Path 3: Product Engineer ('Builder')

This is the hybrid role discussed earlier in this whitepaper, and it is arguably the highest-leverage career path for engineers who have strong product instincts but have historically been constrained to the “how” rather than the “what.” The builder owns the full cycle: identifying the customer problem, prototyping with AI tools, validating with users, and shipping. As noted, Y Combinator’s Garry Tan has suggested that “software engineer” as a title may give way to “builder” or “product manager” [Y Combinator Podcast, Feb 2026]. The skill gaps are the four we identified earlier: customer empathy, commercial acumen, cross-functional influence, and narrative. Engineers who bridge these become exceptionally valuable, and exceptionally rare.

Path 4: AI Platform and Infrastructure Engineer

AI cannot scale without infrastructure. Cloud engineers, site reliability engineers, and platform engineers remain in acute demand because the applications being built are compute-intensive, costly, and prone to failure [Dice.com / LinkedIn Jobs on the Rise, Jan 2026]. The complexity on the backend has increased, not decreased, with the advent of AI. This path suits engineers who prefer working at the systems level and are less drawn to product or customer-facing work. The skill set centers on Kubernetes, GPU orchestration, cloud-native architecture, and the emerging discipline of AI operations (AIOps). It is foundational: no organization can scale its AI ambitions without this capability, and the engineers who own it have significant structural job security.

Path 5: AI-Era Technical Leadership

For senior engineers and engineering managers, the path into CTO, VP of Engineering, or Group Architect roles is being reshaped by everything described in this paper. The next generation of technology leaders will not be selected based on engineering depth alone. They will need to operate across the full spectrum from AI platform strategy to product vision to enterprise change management. This is the rarest profile, and the one boards and CEOs are competing hardest for. The development path is necessarily cross-functional: structured rotations through product, commercial, and operational leadership roles, combined with deep AI fluency. For CHROs, identifying and fast-tracking these individuals is a high-priority succession planning exercise.

The Honest Counsel

There is no path that involves standing still. The data is unambiguous: US programmer employment declined 27.5 percent between 2023 and 2025 [IEEE Spectrum, Dec 2025]. Employment for software developers aged 22 to 25 declined nearly 20 percent from its late 2022 peak [Stanford Digital Economy Lab, 2025]. AI was cited as a factor in 55,000 US layoffs in 2025 [Challenger, Gray & Christmas].

But the data also tells a cautionary tale about overcorrection. In February 2026, Block CEO Jack Dorsey cut 40 percent of the company’s workforce (over 4,000 employees) in what he described as a bet that AI-powered tools would allow a significantly smaller team to do more [SF Standard, Feb 2026]. Within weeks, Block began quietly rehiring laid-off engineers and other staff, with at least one termination attributed to a “clerical error” and a senior technical lead threatening to resign unless his team was partially restored [Business Insider / Yahoo Finance, Mar 2026]. The pattern is not unique to Block. Klarna replaced 700 employees with AI, saw quality collapse, and had to rehire. Forrester’s Predictions 2026 report found that 55 percent of employers already regret their AI-attributed layoffs and predicts that half of AI layoffs will be quietly reversed, often through offshore rehiring at lower salaries [Forrester, Dec 2025]. Goldman Sachs found that companies announcing AI-driven layoffs generally underperform the broader market [Goldman Sachs, 2026].

The lesson is not that AI will not transform engineering organizations. It most likely will. The lesson is that the transformation requires precision, not blunt force. Cutting headcount without understanding which capabilities are structurally irreplaceable, which roles are genuinely automatable, and which are being relabelled leads to exactly the kind of operational chaos that Block experienced. The engineers who will navigate this successfully are those who treat the current moment not as a threat but as a forcing function. They can direct AI toward outcomes that matter.

For the CHRO and CTO reading this: your engineers are already asking these questions, despite them not asking them aloud. Having a credible, structured answer – with real development pathways, not platitudes about “upskilling” – is the difference between retaining your best talent and losing them to organizations that take the question more seriously.

The Marlin Hawk Viewpoint

We are not in a period of incremental change. The operating assumptions that have governed technology organizations for two decades are all being renegotiated simultaneously – Agile rituals, Scrum ceremonies, the product-engineering divide, the CIO as infrastructure custodian. The organizations that will navigate this well are those where the CHRO, the CTO, and the CIO are working cohesively to redesign structures, roles, and capabilities for a fundamentally different model of work.

The window to get ahead of this is narrow. The market is moving. The question is whether your organization is moving with it.

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