OPEN VARIABLE RESEARCH

PUBLIC REPORT PREVIEW

The Broken Ladder

The work AI automates first is also the work that trains tomorrow's senior professionals.

Research on how automating entry-level professional work can weaken the apprenticeship system that produces senior talent, with implications for firms, education, urban property, consumer demand, and public finance.

THE DECISION QUESTION

Entry-level unemployment is the visible signal. The deeper issue is the loss of structured work through which firms convert junior labor into experienced judgment. Near-term efficiency can therefore create a delayed talent constraint that conventional cost accounting does not capture.

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WHAT THIS REPORT HELPS YOU DO

- Why recent college-graduate unemployment and underemployment may be an early structural signal rather than only a cyclical anomaly.
- Why remote-work friction does not fully explain the selective pressure on entry-level professional roles.
- How automating structured junior tasks can weaken the production system for senior judgment.
- Which labor, education, property, consumption, and public-finance indicators would confirm or overturn the thesis.

SELECTED ANALYSIS

The anomaly

The New York Fed's recent-graduate series showed unemployment among college graduates aged 22 to 27 at 5.6% in March 2026, above the national rate cited in the brief, while underemployment stood at 41.5%. The signal is not the degree alone. It is that the historical entry advantage of a degree has weakened at the point where firms are redesigning junior work.

Why the first rung moved first

Entry-level tasks are structured, specifiable, and easy to benchmark: document review, basic research, model updates, standard drafting, and routine analysis. Those characteristics make them suitable for current AI systems. Senior work depends more heavily on judgment, relationships, accountability, and unstable context, so the displacement sequence begins lower in the organization.

WHAT WOULD CHANGE THE CONCLUSION

VERIFICATION SIGNALS

- Recent-graduate unemployment remains above the national rate and underemployment stays elevated through subsequent New York Fed updates.
- AI-attributed layoffs and reductions in graduate or entry-level intakes continue to rise relative to broader workforce reductions.
- Professional firms preserve senior hiring or output while reducing the junior cohorts that historically supplied their future bench.

DISPROOF SIGNALS

- Recent-graduate labor outcomes normalize below the national unemployment rate as hiring recovers.
- Junior intakes rebound despite wider AI deployment, indicating complementarity rather than removal of the apprenticeship layer.
- Firms establish measurable AI-native training systems that reproduce senior capability without the former task sequence.

FULL REPORT

Labor-market series + company and sector evidence map

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