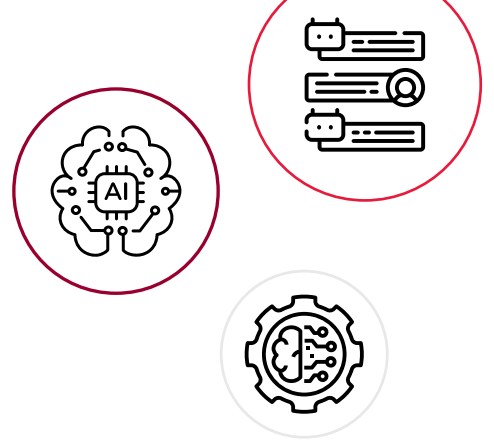


AI efficiency trap

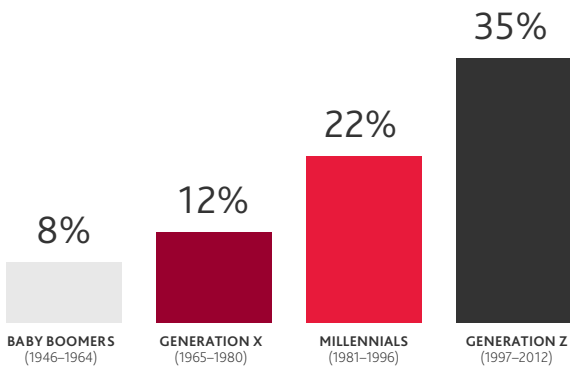
How can you make sure AI delivers more for your business than just efficiency gains? This is one of the key themes explored in our Trend Report. In this report, BDO looks ahead to 2030 together with trendwatcher Tom Palmaerts. We show how Belgian companies can shape the future with agility and confidence. AI can boost quality and impact but beware of the efficiency trap and other hidden pitfalls.



AI efficiency trap

The AI hype is not slowing down. On the contrary, we are witnessing an unprecedented acceleration. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman predicts that the cost of using AI will drop by a factor of ten with each passing year. Companies hope AI will compensate for their staff shortages, while employees hope to find more breathing space by automating repetitive tasks.

At the same time, concerns are also growing. Research by the World Economic Forum shows that worries about technology differ by generation: 35% of Gen Z are concerned, compared to 22% of Millennials, 12% of Gen X and barely 8% of Baby Boomers. Young people use AI for everything and may therefore feel the impact more strongly, while older generations push the effects into the future.



A new generation of students is graduating with dissertations and graduation projects written with the aid of artificial intelligence. How will this impact their analytical and critical thinking abilities? We can entrust everything to AI but we can also use it to ask better questions and fine-tune challenges. Time will tell how AI will impact the quality of our work.

Concrete examples illustrate that we are right to ask questions. KBC has stated that its virtual assistant Kate already does the work of 300 employees. Klarna's chatbot has replaced 700 jobs. L'Oréal has automated product descriptions for 200,000 articles, or the equivalent of 120,000 human working hours. According to research by Hult, 37% of employers say they would rather invest in AI than in young employees. Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff even predicts that the current generation of CEOs will be the last to manage entirely human teams. The danger is that we will be left with too few mid-level experts in the workplace who can later progress to senior profiles.

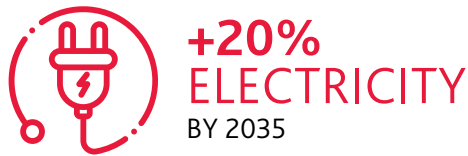
Still, the picture is not uniform. Many jobs are under threat but at the same time 170 million new ones are also emerging. The real question is when will the old jobs disappear and when will the new ones be created? What seems certain though is that a large part of the working population will have to retrain.

The focus on efficiency is understandable. Those who use AI today can work faster but once every company has jumped on the bandwagon, the only thing to set your company apart is quality. Then the question shifts from how much time you save to how you use the time gained. If companies fill the freed up hours with more work then burnouts and opt-outs are just around the corner. If they use the time for training, deepening customer insight or building team spirit, AI can become a lever for well-being and growth. A simple weekly question can help: "Which 15 minutes of your day can AI take over?"

AI is no longer limited to writing support or inbox management. The next step is Agentic AI, virtual colleagues who perform tasks autonomously, from sending emails to processing payments. Radically new applications are emerging as well. Carlo Ratti Associati developed AI Timber, a system that reads construction plans and cuts trees in such a way that hardly any wood is wasted. No straight beams but organic shapes that use raw materials in the most efficient way. AI doesn't replace people here but becomes a creative partner that makes the impossible possible.



Nevertheless, the technology also has downsides. Boston Consulting Group warns that Belgian data centres will consume five times more electricity by 2035, mainly due to AI. The Belgian network is not yet overloaded, making our country an attractive investment target for major tech players such as Google and Microsoft. However, this also puts pressure on the energy balance because AI runs day and night, even when we are not using it. You might say that AI is always dreaming.



An additional downside of artificial intelligence is that people are too quick to assume the answers of language models are accurate. Because the phrasing sounds convincing, AI appears superior to the work of an adviser but is that really the case? Research by the BBC in February 2025 shows that more than half of AI answers to news questions contain errors. When users ask a question in Google, an automatically generated AI answer appears first but only one percent click through to the original source. The AI answers sound reliable but often they are far from accurate. That is why critical thinking remains essential.

"At BDO, we believe that while we shouldn't leave our thinking to AI, it can boost our thinking abilities."

Peter Van Laer, CEO BDO Belgium

That message also resonates in the 'Keep Thinking' campaign by Claude (Anthropic) from September 2025: technology doesn't replace insight; on the contrary, it is an invitation to keep thinking more deeply.

FIVE QUESTIONS EVERY BUSINESS LEADER SHOULD ASK THEMSELVES ABOUT AI:

- 1 Do we choose efficiency or quality?**
 Do we only use AI to save time and costs, or do we also use it to boost the quality of our products and service?
- 2 How do we use the time gained?**
 Do we fill it with even more work or do we use it to invest in training, customer relationships and innovation?
- 3 Are we prepared for the risks?**
 Do we consider ethics, data security, energy consumption and the well-being of our employees in a highly automated environment?
- 4 Do we allow room for experimentation?**
 Assemble a team that is allowed to play and experiment with AI, and that shares its experiences with other teams. Innovation often arises in unexpected places.
- 5 Do we communicate transparently?**
 Share openly where and why you test AI. In a context where Belgians have little trust in AI applications such as employee screening or emotion analysis, privacy is the foundation to build that trust.

"At BDO we obviously focus on the efficiency gains AI enables but at the same time we consciously manage the time this frees up by investing it in quality. Eliminating routine tasks creates room to reflect more thoroughly and formulate recommendations based on the insights generated by AI.

"We also focus on human added value. We expect our staff to consult with each other more often and to call on their colleagues' expertise more often. We ask our employees to use the freed up time to further expand their own knowledge and skills through training and development. Above all we use the freed up time to deepen the relationships with our clients and place even greater focus on BDO's personal touch as an added value, allowing us to take an even more proactive approach to our customers' needs. Ultimately this enhances the quality of our work and sets us apart in an age where AI creates a more level playing field."

Ignace Robberechts, Chief AI Officer
BDO Belgium