

Fast Food and Counter Workers

Kiosks, app ordering and voice-AI drive-throughs are taking the order; automated fryers and smarter scheduling are thinning line and prep tasks.

EXPOSURE	WINDOW	ADOPTION TODAY	READING
36 Moderate exposure	4–9 yrs until change lands	Medium	Augmented more than re-placed. Exposure is the share of today's work AI can plausibly take on within the window.

§ 01 WHAT IS HAPPENING

What is happening to fast food and counter workers

Impact

The most visible change is at the counter: self-order kiosks and mobile apps now take a large share of orders in major chains, and voice assistants from vendors such as SoundHound and Presto are handling drive-through orders at a growing number of sites. In the kitchen, Miso Robotics' Flippy and similar systems run fryer stations, while demand-forecasting software sets prep quantities and staffing levels. The person on shift spends less time keying orders and more time assembling, expediting, handing off delivery bags and fixing whatever the automation gets wrong. Cleaning, restocking and customer problems remain entirely human.

Risk

Moderate exposure: order-taking and some prep automate; assembly, cleaning and service recovery stay human for now.

The measured generative-AI exposure is low - Microsoft Research and the Anthropic Economic Index find almost no counter tasks suited to language models - and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics places the occupation in a moderate official tier. The score carries an upward editorial adjustment because the real channel of change is physical and self-service rather than text: ordering kiosks, voice-AI drive-throughs and automated fryers remove exactly the counter and line tasks that text-usage measures cannot see. Order-taking, payment and parts of frying and drink preparation are automating now; burger assembly, dining-room upkeep, deliveries hand-off and dealing with an unhappy customer are not. Over a 4-9 year window, expect fewer staff per store at peak and a shift toward roles that supervise equipment, manage the delivery channel and handle exceptions. The occupation remains large, but the number of hours per order keeps falling.

Sector readiness

Kiosks Mainstream, Kitchen Automation Emerging

Large quick-service chains have rolled out kiosks and app ordering across most of their estates and are running voice drive-through pilots at scale; franchisees follow corporate direction, so adoption is uneven but moving in one direction. Kitchen robotics are still in pilot and early deployment, limited by cost and the variety of menu tasks. Independent takeaways and small chains mostly rely on third-party ordering apps and standard tills with little in-store automation.

§ 02 POSITION

Where you stand

- i Become the crew member who can troubleshoot the kiosk, the order screen and the fryer so you are the one managers keep when staffing tightens.
- ii Move toward shift lead or trainer roles, which grow in importance as each store runs with fewer, more capable people.
- iii Treat the role as a stepping stone and document customer service, speed and reliability as transferable skills for hospitality, retail or logistics.

§ 03 ACTIONS

6 POINTS

What this means for you

Concrete changes to how the work gets done, in the order you are likely to meet them.

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- 01 **Learn every station.** Cross-training on fryer, grill, drinks and expediting makes you harder to cut when kiosks remove counter hours. Ask for it explicitly.

 - 02 **Be the fixer.** When the kiosk freezes or the voice bot mishears, someone has to recover the order and the customer. Being good at that is now a core skill, not a side task.

 - 03 **Own the delivery channel.** Third-party delivery and app pick-up are where volume is moving. Learn the hand-off process and the apps so you can run that queue on a busy shift.

 - 04 **Aim for shift lead early.** Smaller crews mean each shift leader matters more. Tell your manager you want the training and take the food-safety certifications that come with it.

 - 05 **Watch the equipment, not just the menu.** Automated fryers and drink systems need someone to load, clean and reset them. People who understand the machines are the ones kept on.

 - 06 **Keep your options open.** The customer handling, pace and cash discipline you build here are valued in retail, hospitality and warehousing. Keep a simple record of what you have done.
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§ 04 CAUSES

6 DRIVERS

What is pushing this change

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- 01 **Self-order kiosks and mobile apps.** Customers increasingly place and pay for orders themselves, removing the counter transaction that was once the role's central task.

 - 02 **Voice-AI drive-throughs.** Vendors such as SoundHound and Presto supply conversational ordering systems that chains are deploying at drive-through lanes, with staff stepping in only for exceptions.

 - 03 **Kitchen robotics for repetitive stations.** Miso Robotics' Flippy and similar systems automate frying and some drink preparation, the most repetitive and injury-prone tasks on the line.

 - 04 **Forecast-driven scheduling and prep.** Software predicts demand by hour and sets both staffing and prep quantities, tightening labour hours rather than removing whole roles.

 - 05 **Delivery and pick-up volume.** A growing share of orders arrive through apps, shifting work from the counter to bagging, verification and courier hand-off.

 - 06 **Editorial adjustment for physical channels.** The score is raised because kiosks, voice ordering and automated fryers remove real tasks that text-based exposure measures do not register.
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Impact by sector

The headline figure is an average. Where you work changes the picture.

Major quick-service chains	The most exposed setting, with kiosks, app ordering and voice drive-through deployed across estates and kitchen robotics in active pilots.
Coffee and beverage chains	Mobile ordering dominates and automated brewing is advancing, but drink customisation and the barista interaction remain largely human.
Independent takeaways and cafes	Least exposed: ordering apps bring in volume, but the kitchen and counter run on people with little in-store automation.
Airport, campus and stadium concessions	High-throughput, standardised menus make these early adopters of kiosks, automated kitchens and cashierless checkout.

Skills to build

The skills that keep the human part of this work valuable as the routine part is automated.

- 01 **Multi-station competence.** Being able to work grill, fryer, drinks and expediting is the clearest protection against reduced hours. Request cross-training and keep a record of it.
- 02 **Service recovery.** Fixing a wrong order or an upset customer quickly is what the automation cannot do. Learn a simple structure for apologising, fixing and following up.
- 03 **Equipment handling and basic troubleshooting.** Kiosks, automated fryers and order screens all need resetting, cleaning and loading. Volunteer to learn the maintenance routines.
- 04 **Delivery and pick-up operations.** Managing the app queue, verifying orders and handing off to couriers is a growing share of the work; being good at it makes you valuable at peak.
- 05 **Food safety and compliance.** Certifications and a clean record are prerequisites for shift lead roles and remain squarely human responsibilities.
- 06 **Leading a small crew.** As stores run leaner, shift leaders carry more weight. Practise clear communication, task allocation and calm under pressure.

Tools in use

KINDS OF TOOL WORTH KNOWING

- 01

Automated beverage and brewing systems. Robotic coffee and drink-dispensing machines in coffee chains and concessions, reducing manual drink preparation.
- 02

Demand-forecasting scheduling tools. Labour scheduling platforms that set shifts from predicted sales, worth understanding because they determine your hours.

NAMED TOOLS ALREADY IN USE

Miso Robotics Flippy	VISIT
Robotic fryer system deployed in quick-service kitchens to run fry stations with staff loading and supervising.	
SoundHound voice ordering	VISIT
Conversational AI used by restaurant chains to take drive-through and phone orders.	
Presto Voice	VISIT
Drive-through voice assistant deployed by quick-service brands to automate order-taking with human fallback.	
Toast kiosks and online ordering	VISIT
Self-order kiosks and digital ordering integrated with the point-of-sale, common in smaller chains and independents.	

In practice

Ways people in this role are already using AI, and what they get from it.

Voice-ordered drive-through EXAMPLE 1	HOW	A chain site routes drive-through orders to a voice assistant that takes the order and sends it to the kitchen screen, with a crew member listening in and taking over when it struggles.
	GAIN	Frees one headset position at peak and keeps order accuracy consistent.
Robotic fry station EXAMPLE 2	HOW	Staff load baskets and the robot handles timing, shaking and transfer to the holding area, while a crew member seasons and packs.
	GAIN	Removes a hot, repetitive task and keeps fry quality steady through the rush.

Kiosk-first ordering EXAMPLE 3	HOW	A store moves most dine-in orders to kiosks and reassigns the counter position to a guest host who helps with the screens and runs food to tables.
	GAIN	Shorter queues and higher average order values, with staff redeployed rather than idle.

§ 09 CONTEXT

How this role compares

Three neighbouring roles chosen to show the direction of travel.

Cashiers MORE EXPOSED	AI IMPACT	Self-checkout and cashierless stores remove the core transaction task almost entirely.
	WORK MOVES TO	Customer assistance, loss prevention and supervisory roles.
Chefs and Head Cooks DIFFERENT SKILLS, GROWING	AI IMPACT	Menu planning and ordering get software support while cooking, quality and kitchen leadership remain human.
	WORK MOVES TO	Culinary skill, cost control and leading a team.
Bartenders COMPLEMENTARY, LESS EXPOSED	AI IMPACT	AI reaches inventory and marketing but the service, judgement and craft behind the bar stay manual.
	WORK MOVES TO	Hospitality, drinks knowledge and responsible service.

§ 10 VERDICT

Closing judgement

If you work a counter or a line, the honest picture is that the order-taking part of the job is going away and the rest is being squeezed for speed. That does not make the work disappear, but it does change who gets the hours: people who can run a kitchen station, manage the delivery queue, keep the equipment running and handle customers when the kiosk fails. Use the job to build a record of reliability and supervision, because shift leader and assistant manager are the roles that get more secure as crews get smaller. If you want out of the sector, the customer-handling and pace you learn here transfer well.

Evidence and revisions

What the exposure figure rests on, what changed when it was last revised, and the published work cited for this role.

SCORE

36

WINDOW

4-9 years (unchanged)

The 5 October 2026 review held the score.

Exposure Index v2. Inputs: task applicability 33/100 (Microsoft AI applicability score 0.16 for Fast food and counter workers); observed usage 0/100 (Anthropic observed exposure 0.00); official exposure tier 40/100 (BLS: moderate); labour-market trajectory not yet mapped for this occupation, so its weight was spread across the other inputs; published adoption rating 40/100 (medium adoption). Weighted base 28.3. Editorial adjustment +8: Ordering kiosks, voice-AI drive-throughs and automated fryers remove counter and line tasks; self-service and physical channels not seen by text-usage measures. Final score 36. New report: the window of 4-9 years is set from the score band.

HOW THE FIGURE IS BUILT (EXPOSURE INDEX V2)

Task applicability — Microsoft Research, AI applicability score	33 × 39%	12.8
Observed usage — Anthropic Economic Index, observed exposure	0 × 22%	0.0
Official exposure tier — US BLS AI-exposure category	40 × 22%	8.9
Labour-market trajectory — US BLS projected employment change 2025–35	not measured	—
Published adoption rating — This report’s adoption level	40 × 17%	6.7
Weighted base		28.3
Editorial adjustment: Ordering kiosks, voice-AI drive-throughs and automated fryers remove counter and line tasks; self-service and physical channels not seen by text-usage measures.		+8
Exposure score		36

MEASURES BEHIND THE SCORE

US Bureau of Labor Statistics · *Employment Projections 2025–35 and AI Exposure Categories* (27 August 2026)
AI-exposure tier: Moderate. Projected employment change not yet mapped for this occupation. Matched to Fast food and counter workers.

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Microsoft Research · *Working with AI: Measuring the Applicability of Generative AI to Occupations* (10 July 2025)
AI applicability score 0.16 for SOC 35-3023; scaled to 33/100 as the task-applicability input.

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Anthropic · *Anthropic Economic Index report: Cadences* (26 June 2026)
Observed exposure 0.00 for SOC 35-3023; scaled to 0/100 as the observed-usage input.

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UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology · *Assessment of AI capabilities and the impact on the UK labour market* (28 January 2026)

UK context: around 70% of UK workers are in occupations with tasks AI could perform or enhance, above the US average; a one-standard-deviation rise in exposure was associated with a 3.9% fall in UK job postings.

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<https://www.careerguard.ai/sources>

§ 12 APPENDIX

Method and sources

Each report was written from a large body of published research. The exposure score itself is computed, not written: it is the CareerGuard Exposure Index, a weighted average of occupation-level measures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (AI-exposure classification and 2025–35 projections), Microsoft Research (AI applicability scores) and Anthropic (observed exposure), together with the adoption rating published on the report. The organisations and publications below are the standing literature behind the narrative sections. Every source, with dates, licences and archived copies where we are permitted to hold them, is catalogued in the research library.

Exposure Index v2 (October 2026). Each input is scaled to 0–100 and weighted: task applicability 35% (Microsoft AI applicability score ÷ 0.5), observed usage 20% (Anthropic observed exposure ÷ 0.75), official exposure tier 20% (BLS very high = 100, high = 70, moderate = 40, low = 10), labour-market trajectory 10% ($50 - 2.5 \times \text{projected \% employment change}$), published adoption rating 15% (very high = 85, high = 70, medium-high = 55, medium = 40, low-medium = 25, low = 10). Inputs not measured for an occupation are dropped and the remaining weights renormalised. An editorial adjustment of at most ± 12 points is allowed only for automation channels the measures cannot see (robotics, self-service, machine vision, medical imaging, RPA/OCR, generative video) and is always logged with its reason. Scores are whole numbers, not rounded to five. The change window shifts one notch (a year at each end) per ten points of movement.

I GLOBAL AND MACROECONOMIC IMPACT OF AI ON WORK**World Economic Forum**

The Future of Jobs Report series — Employer survey of expected job growth and decline, skill shifts and technology adoption (2020, 2023 and 2025 editions); *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Entry-Level Work* (2026).

AI governance and transformation reports — Frameworks on ethical AI, talent strategy and industry transformation.

McKinsey Global Institute

AI, Automation and the Future of Work series — Research quantifying automation potential by task, sector and demographic, from "Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained" to "Agents, robots, and us" (2025).

Industry-specific reports — Financial services, healthcare, manufacturing and others.

PwC

Global AI Jobs Barometer — Annual analysis of job postings and productivity by AI exposure (2024–2026 editions).

Upskilling Hopes and Fears survey — Employee perceptions and readiness.

Microsoft Research and Anthropic

Working with AI (2025); *Anthropic Economic Index* (2025–2026) — Occupation-level usage data from Copilot and Claude conversations, the two observed-usage measures behind the 2026 revision.

Stanford Digital Economy Lab and Stanford HAI

Canaries in the Coal Mine? (2025–2026); AI Index Report (annual) — Payroll evidence on early-career employment in exposed occupations; annual measurement of AI capability, investment and adoption.

Deloitte

Human Capital Trends series — Workforce, talent and HR technology trends.

Tech Trends series — Emerging technologies and their business implications.

Accenture

Technology Vision series — Forward-looking analysis of emerging technology, with emphasis on AI.

Fjord Trends — Design, innovation and human experience in a digital world.

Boston Consulting Group

AI/ML insights and industry solutions — "The AI Revolution in the Workplace" and related research.

EY

AI and workforce reports — Adoption, talent strategy and ethics.

IBM Institute for Business Value

AI and automation studies — Business models, workforce evolution and leadership.

OECD

AI Policy Observatory — International data and policy on AI, labour markets and skills.

Employment Outlook — Labour-market trends including technological impact (2023–2026 editions).

International Labour Organization

Generative AI and Jobs: A Refined Global Index of Occupational Exposure (2025) — Task-level exposure gradients for every ISCO occupation; successor to the 2023 global index.

International Monetary Fund

Staff Discussion Notes on AI and work (2024, 2026) — Complementarity framing: where AI augments and where it substitutes.

UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Assessment of AI capabilities and the impact on the UK labour market (2026) — UK occupational exposure and job-posting evidence.

Brookings Institution

AI and automation research — Economic and social implications, displacement and skills.

Yale Budget Lab and Goldman Sachs Research

Tracking the Impact of AI on the Labor Market; AI and the US labour market (2026) — Aggregate labour-market monitoring; macro displacement estimates.

Oxford University (Oxford Martin School)

The Future of Employment — Frey & Osborne and subsequent research on susceptibility to automation.

MIT Technology Review

AI & Work — Reporting on AI research and its implications for industries and jobs.

Gartner

Hype Cycle for Artificial Intelligence — Maturity and adoption of AI technologies.

Future of Work reports — Workplace models and talent strategy.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Employment Projections 2025–35; AI Exposure Categories; Occupational Outlook Handbook — Ten-year employment projections and, from the 2025 cycle, an AI-exposure tier for every detailed occupation.

Indeed Hiring Lab

AI at Work Report (2025) and posting-market updates — Skill-level transformation estimates and job-posting trends by occupation.

II CORE AI AND MACHINE-LEARNING RESEARCH

OpenAI*Research papers, blog and API documentation* — Large language models, generative AI, safety and societal impact.**Google DeepMind***Research papers and blog* — Reinforcement learning, AI for science, AGI and ethics.**Meta AI***Research papers and blog* — Large language models, computer vision, AI for social good.**Hugging Face***Transformers library and model hub* — Open-source state-of-the-art NLP models.**TensorFlow and PyTorch***Documentation and community forums* — Core frameworks illustrating practical capability.**arXiv***cs.AI, cs.LG, cs.CV, cs.CL* — Pre-print research.**NeurIPS and ICML***Conference proceedings* — Top-tier academic research.**ACM and IEEE***Journals and proceedings* — ACM Computing Surveys; IEEE Transactions on AI.**Kaggle***Datasets and competition solutions* — Applied machine learning on real-world problems.**The Alan Turing Institute***Research and reports* — Responsible and applied AI.

III ETHICAL AND RESPONSIBLE AI DEPLOYMENT**NIST***AI Risk Management Framework* — Voluntary framework for managing AI risk.**European Commission***AI Act* — Risk-tiered legal framework for AI.*Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI* — Principles for responsible development.**Partnership on AI***Research and best practice* — Responsible AI development.**AI Now Institute***Annual reports* — Social implications: power, inequality, rights.**ACM FAccT***Proceedings* — Fairness, accountability and transparency.**Data & Society***Publications* — Social implications of data-centric technology.**WIPO***Conversation on IP and AI* — Intellectual-property implications of AI.**IEEE Global Initiative on Ethics of AI/IS***Ethically Aligned Design* — Recommendations for ethical AI design.**Center for AI and Digital Policy***Policy briefs* — Accountable AI policy.

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