

Deskilling Traps: A Dynamical Systems Model of Supervisory Skill Erosion Under AI Assistance

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ABSTRACT

As organizations increasingly deploy AI assistants across professional domains, a critical question emerges: does AI assistance erode the human skills required to supervise automated outputs? We formalize this question through a dynamical systems model that couples skill evolution, metacognitive calibration, and endogenous AI reliance. Through computational experiments across four professional domains (software engineering, medicine, finance, and aviation), we identify *deskilling traps*—parameter regimes where workers lose supervisory competence and simultaneously lose awareness of their incompetence, making self-correction impossible. Our simulations reveal three key findings: (1) novice workers in high-reliability AI domains (aviation, medicine) are most vulnerable, with all experience levels in aviation entering deskilling traps; (2) a *reliability paradox* exists wherein higher AI reliability increases deskilling risk by reducing the error signals necessary for skill maintenance, with a critical threshold at approximately 0.938 reliability; and (3) scaffolded autonomy—where AI progressively reduces its assistance as worker skill grows—is the most effective intervention, raising final skill from 0.048 to 0.983 while reducing cumulative harm by 87.6%. We further document a stark *generational asymmetry*: workers who developed skills before AI adoption retain substantially higher supervisory capacity than those who entered the profession with AI from the start. These results have direct policy implications for organizational AI deployment, training design, and regulatory oversight in safety-critical domains.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI);
- Computing methodologies → Modeling and simulation.

KEYWORDS

AI assistance, deskilling, human oversight, automation, skill decay, supervisory control

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid adoption of AI assistants across professional domains has produced measurable productivity gains [5, 15]. Software engineers using code generation tools complete tasks faster [15], knowledge workers with AI support produce higher-quality outputs [7], and medical professionals using diagnostic AI achieve greater accuracy on routine cases [5]. Yet this performance improvement comes with an underexamined cost: the potential erosion of the human skills required to *supervise* the very systems providing the assistance.

Shen et al. [16] identify this tension as a central open problem: “Although more workers rely on AI to improve their productivity, it is unclear whether the use of AI assistance in the workplace might hinder core understanding of concepts or prevent the development of skills necessary to supervise automated tasks.” This problem

is especially acute in safety-critical domains—aviation, medicine, nuclear operations—where human oversight of automated systems is not merely desirable but legally and ethically mandated.

The concern is not new. Bainbridge’s seminal “ironies of automation” [3] observed that automation eliminates the very tasks through which operators develop and maintain the skills needed to intervene when automation fails. Parasuraman and Riley [14] documented patterns of misuse, disuse, and abuse of automation arising from miscalibrated trust. Endsley [9] synthesized decades of human-automation interaction research, emphasizing that situation awareness degrades when humans become passive monitors rather than active controllers.

However, the current wave of generative AI introduces qualitatively new dynamics. Unlike traditional automation, which executes fixed procedures, modern AI systems produce novel outputs that require domain-specific expertise to evaluate. A code generation tool may produce syntactically valid but semantically incorrect code; a diagnostic AI may suggest a plausible but wrong diagnosis. Detecting such errors requires the very skills that AI assistance may erode—creating a potentially self-reinforcing *deskilling trap*.

We formalize this phenomenon through a dynamical systems model that captures five interacting processes: (1) skill growth through deliberate practice, (2) skill decay from disuse when tasks are offloaded to AI, (3) partial skill maintenance from reviewing AI outputs, (4) metacognitive calibration evolution, and (5) error detection as a function of the skill-difficulty gap. Our contributions are:

- A formal dynamical model of supervisory skill evolution under AI assistance that identifies deskilling trap conditions (Section 2).
- Computational experiments across four professional domains revealing domain-specific vulnerability patterns and a *reliability paradox* where higher AI reliability increases deskilling risk (Section 3).
- Systematic comparison of four mitigation interventions, demonstrating that scaffolded autonomy is the most effective, achieving near-complete skill preservation (Section 3).
- Evidence of a stark generational asymmetry between pre-AI and post-AI cohorts with implications for workforce training policy (Section 3).

1.1 Related Work

Skill acquisition and decay. The cognitive science of skill development, from Fitts and Posner’s stage theory [11] through Anderson’s ACT-R framework [1], establishes that skills are built through deliberate practice [10] and decay without use [2]. Our model builds on these foundations, using logistic skill growth and exponential decay as established functional forms.

117 *AI and learning.* Recent empirical work has begun to document
 118 AI's effects on learning. Bastani et al. [4] found that students using
 119 GPT-4 for practice performed worse on subsequent unassisted
 120 assessments, providing direct evidence that AI assistance can hinder
 121 skill formation. Doshi and Hauser [8] showed that while AI
 122 enhances individual creative output, it reduces collective diversity—
 123 suggesting that AI assistance may narrow the distribution of human
 124 capabilities.

125
 126 *Automation and human factors.* The human factors literature
 127 on automation provides the theoretical foundation for our work.
 128 Lee and See [13] established that trust in automation is a dynamic
 129 process that depends on reliability, predictability, and experience.
 130 Our model incorporates these insights through the endogenous
 131 reliance mechanism. The broader concern about cognitive risks
 132 from AI dependence is discussed in [18], while domain-specific
 133 effects in software development are examined in [6, 17]. Learning
 134 effects from AI tool experience, including difficulties in disentangling
 135 genuine skill development from tool-dependent performance,
 136 are explored in [19].

137
 138 *The Dunning-Kruger connection.* Kruger and Dunning [12] showed
 139 that individuals with low competence in a domain tend to overestimate
 140 their ability, precisely because they lack the metacognitive
 141 skill to recognize their deficiency. Our model formalizes this insight:
 142 when both skill and metacognition fall below critical thresholds,
 143 the worker is trapped because they cannot recognize their inability
 144 to supervise.

2 METHODS

2.1 Model Overview

145 We model a worker whose supervisory skill $s(t) \in [0, 1]$ and
 146 metacognitive calibration $m(t) \in [0, 1]$ evolve over discrete time
 147 steps (each representing one week). The worker handles $N = 20$
 148 tasks per time step, delegating a fraction $r(t) \in [0, 0.95]$ to an AI
 149 system. The model consists of three coupled dynamical equations
 150 governing skill, metacognition, and reliance.

2.2 Skill Dynamics

151 The skill level evolves as:

$$\frac{ds}{dt} = \underbrace{\alpha \cdot (1 - r) \cdot s(1 - s)}_{\text{growth}} - \underbrace{\beta \cdot r \cdot s + \tau \cdot \alpha \cdot r \cdot s(1 - s)/2}_{\text{decay}} + \underbrace{\tau \cdot \alpha \cdot r \cdot s(1 - s)/2}_{\text{transfer}} \quad (1)$$

152 where α is the skill growth rate from unassisted practice, β is the
 153 decay rate from disuse, τ is the review transfer coefficient capturing
 154 partial learning from reviewing AI outputs, and r is the AI reliance
 155 fraction. The growth term uses a logistic form: skill grows fastest at
 156 intermediate levels and saturates near the extremes. The decay term
 157 is proportional to both current skill and reliance: more delegation
 158 causes faster decay. The transfer term captures that reviewing AI
 159 outputs provides some (reduced) learning signal.

2.3 Error Detection

160 The probability that a worker detects an AI error on a task of
 161 difficulty d is:

$$P(\text{detect} | s, m, d) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-\kappa(s-d)}} \cdot (0.5 + 0.5m) \quad (2)$$

162 where $\kappa = 5 + 10m$ controls the sigmoid steepness. The first factor
 163 captures the domain skill requirement: detection is likely when
 164 skill exceeds task difficulty and unlikely otherwise. The second
 165 factor captures metacognitive vigilance: even with sufficient skill,
 166 a worker who rubber-stamps AI outputs (low m) will miss errors.

2.4 Metacognition Dynamics

167 Metacognitive calibration evolves as:

$$\frac{dm}{dt} = \underbrace{0.02 \cdot e_{\text{exp}} \cdot (1 - m)}_{\text{calibration signal}} - \underbrace{0.01 \cdot r \cdot \rho_{\text{AI}} \cdot m}_{\text{complacency}} \quad (3)$$

168 where e_{exp} is the error exposure rate (fraction of AI-handled tasks
 169 containing errors that the worker encounters) and ρ_{AI} is the AI
 170 reliability. Metacognition grows when the worker encounters and
 171 processes errors, and decays through complacency when AI reliabil-
 172 ity is high and reliance is strong.

2.5 Endogenous Reliance

173 AI reliance adapts based on perceived AI quality:

$$\frac{dr}{dt} = 0.02 \cdot (\hat{q}_{\text{AI}} - 0.5) \quad (4)$$

174 where $\hat{q}_{\text{AI}} = 1 - e_{\text{detected}}/\max(Nr, 1)$ is the perceived quality based
 175 on detected errors. This creates a positive feedback loop: when few
 176 errors are detected (either because AI is reliable or because the
 177 worker cannot detect errors), reliance increases, further reducing
 178 practice opportunities.

2.6 Deskilling Trap Definition

179 We define a *deskilling trap* as a state where:

$$s(T) < 0.3 \quad \text{and} \quad m(T) < 0.3 \quad (5)$$

180 at the end of the simulation ($T = 200$ weeks). This captures the
 181 condition where the worker both (a) lacks the skill to supervise AI
 182 outputs effectively and (b) lacks the metacognitive awareness to
 183 recognize their deficiency.

2.7 Domain Configuration

184 We instantiate the model across four professional domains with
 185 parameters calibrated from the human factors literature (Table 1).
 186 Each domain differs in error severity, AI reliability, task novelty
 187 rate, and skill dynamics parameters.

2.8 Interventions

188 We evaluate four candidate interventions:

- 189 (1) **Scheduled Practice:** 20% of time is mandatory unassisted
 190 practice, regardless of AI reliance level.
- 191 (2) **Scaffolded Autonomy:** AI reduces its assistance as worker
 192 skill grows: $r_{\text{eff}} = r \cdot (1 - 0.5s)$.

Table 1: Domain configuration parameters. Error severity reflects the cost of undetected errors (0=benign, 1=catastrophic). AI reliability is the baseline probability of correct AI output. Task novelty rate is the fraction of tasks outside the AI training distribution.

Parameter	Software	Medicine	Finance	Aviation
Error severity	0.30	0.90	0.60	0.95
AI reliability	0.85	0.90	0.80	0.95
Novelty rate	0.25	0.15	0.30	0.05
Feedback delay	5.0	15.0	10.0	0.5
Growth rate α	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.04
Decay rate β	0.02	0.015	0.025	0.03
Transfer rate τ	0.30	0.20	0.25	0.15

- (3) **Adversarial Training:** AI deliberately inserts detectable errors at a 10% rate to maintain vigilance.
- (4) **Explainability Requirement:** Worker must explain why AI output is correct, doubling the transfer learning rate τ .

2.9 Experimental Design

We conduct four experiments:

- **Experiment 1:** Deskilling trap identification across all four domains with three experience levels (novice, intermediate, expert).
- **Experiment 2:** Intervention comparison for a novice software engineer across 10 random seeds.
- **Experiment 3:** Reliability threshold sweep from 0.50 to 0.99 (20 points) to identify the critical reliability level above which deskilling traps emerge.
- **Experiment 4:** Generational asymmetry comparison between pre-AI workers (high initial skill) and post-AI workers (low initial skill, high initial reliance) over 300 weeks.

All simulations use $N = 20$ tasks per time step, with task difficulties drawn from a Beta(2,5) distribution. Results are reproducible via fixed random seeds.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Experiment 1: Deskilling Traps Across Domains

Table 2 summarizes the outcomes of 200-week simulations across four domains and three experience levels. The most striking finding is that all experience levels in aviation enter deskilling traps, including experts who begin with skill level 0.80. In aviation, the combination of very high AI reliability (0.95) and high skill decay rate (0.03) creates a regime where the error signal is too sparse to sustain skill, and the low review transfer rate (0.15) means that passive monitoring provides insufficient learning.

Medicine shows a mixed pattern: novice physicians enter the deskilling trap ($s = 0.047, m = 0.300$), but intermediate and expert physicians maintain metacognition above the threshold despite severe skill decay. Finance produces the lowest final skills across all levels but avoids traps because metacognition remains relatively high ($m > 0.45$), likely due to the higher task novelty rate (0.30) providing more error signals.

Table 2: Experiment 1: Final outcomes after 200 weeks of AI-assisted work. Deskilling traps (skill < 0.3 and metacognition < 0.3) are marked with \dagger . All workers begin with AI reliance ≥ 0.50 and converge to maximum reliance (0.95) by simulation end.

Domain	Level	Final Skill	Final Meta.	Detect Rate	Total Harm
3*Software	Novice	0.048	0.390	0.262	298 66.6
	Intermediate	0.075	0.404	0.408	299 54.4
	Expert	0.106	0.429	0.542	300 43.8
3*Medicine	Novice \dagger	0.047	0.300	0.255	301 124.8
	Intermediate	0.076	0.322	0.355	302 116.9
	Expert	0.106	0.344	0.472	303 89.4
3*Finance	Novice	0.012	0.458	0.195	304 173.5
	Intermediate	0.022	0.475	0.277	305 167.4
	Expert	0.040	0.490	0.444	306 127.2
3*Aviation	Novice \dagger	0.010	0.187	0.213	307 65.5
	Intermediate \dagger	0.010	0.218	0.159	308 71.3
	Expert \dagger	0.010	0.242	0.357	309 53.5

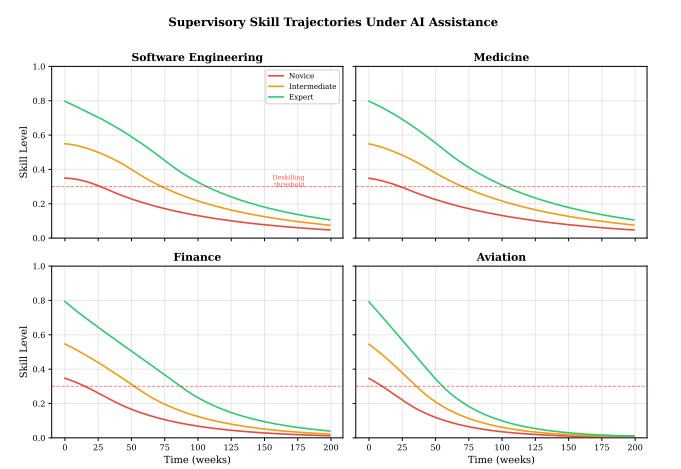


Figure 1: Supervisory skill trajectories over 200 weeks across four domains and three experience levels (novice, intermediate, expert). The dashed red line at $s = 0.3$ marks the supervisory competence threshold. All trajectories decline, but the rate and final level depend on domain characteristics. Aviation shows the most severe decline due to high AI reliability and low review transfer.

Figure 1 shows the skill trajectories across domains. In all cases, skill declines monotonically once AI reliance saturates, but the rate and asymptotic behavior differ substantially by domain.

3.2 Experiment 2: Intervention Effectiveness

Table 3 presents the intervention comparison results for a novice software engineer, averaged over 10 random seeds. Scaffolded autonomy dramatically outperforms all other interventions, achieving a final skill of 0.983 ± 0.001 compared to 0.048 ± 0.000 under no intervention—a 20-fold improvement. The mechanism is clear: by

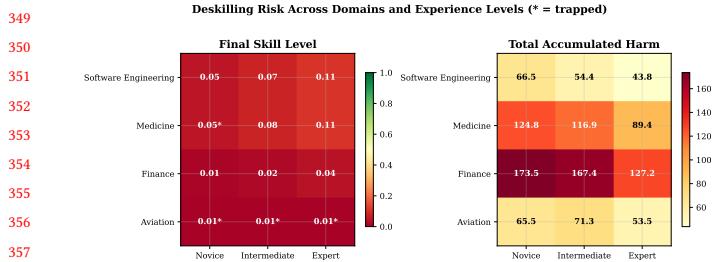


Figure 2: Deskilling risk heatmap across domains and experience levels. Left: final skill level (green = high, red = low). Right: total accumulated harm over 200 weeks. Asterisks (*) mark deskilling trap states. Aviation is uniquely vulnerable across all experience levels, while finance accumulates the most harm due to moderate AI reliability and high task novelty.

Table 3: Experiment 2: Intervention comparison for a novice software engineer (10 seeds). Scaffolded autonomy achieves dramatically higher skill and lower harm than all alternatives.

Intervention	Final Skill	Detection Rate	Total Harm
No Intervention	0.048 ± 0.000	0.234 ± 0.012	67.1 ± 1.7
Scheduled Practice	0.125 ± 0.000	0.295 ± 0.013	63.5 ± 1.7
Scaffolded Autonomy	0.983 ± 0.001	0.684 ± 0.034	8.3 ± 0.7
Adversarial Training	0.048 ± 0.000	0.234 ± 0.012	60.1 ± 1.5
Explainability Req.	0.126 ± 0.000	0.303 ± 0.017	62.9 ± 2.3

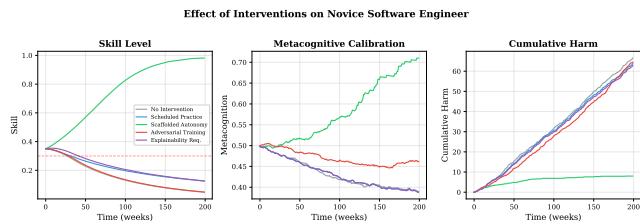


Figure 3: Intervention trajectories for a novice software engineer over 200 weeks. Left: skill level. Center: metacognitive calibration. Right: cumulative harm. Scaffolded autonomy (green) is the only intervention that reverses the deskilling trajectory, achieving near-expert skill levels. The remaining interventions slow but do not prevent skill decline.

reducing AI assistance as skill grows, scaffolded autonomy restores the practice signal that drives skill acquisition.

Scheduled practice and the explainability requirement produce modest improvements (skill approximately 0.125 vs. 0.048), while adversarial training improves metacognition (0.448 vs. 0.388) and reduces harm but does not substantively improve skill level. The key insight is that adversarial error injection provides a calibration signal but does not restore the practice volume needed for skill growth.

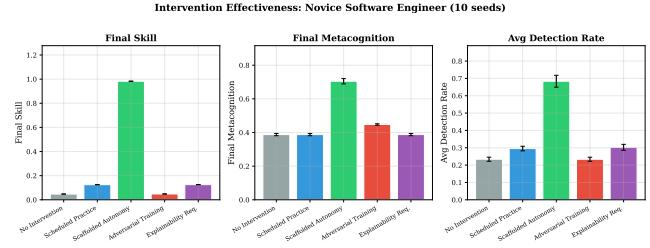


Figure 4: Bar chart comparison of intervention outcomes (mean \pm standard deviation across 10 seeds). Scaffolded autonomy is dramatically superior across all three metrics: final skill, metacognition, and error detection rate.

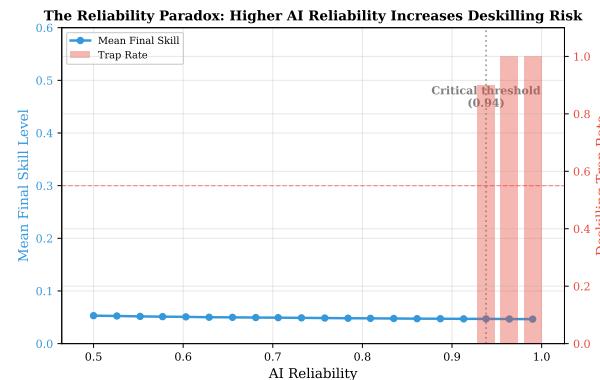


Figure 5: The reliability paradox: higher AI reliability paradoxically increases deskilling risk. Blue line (left axis): mean final skill level decreases as AI reliability increases. Red bars (right axis): deskilling trap rate. A critical threshold emerges at reliability ≈ 0.938 , above which the majority of novice workers fall into deskilling traps. This occurs because highly reliable AI produces fewer errors, depriving workers of the calibration signals needed to maintain metacognitive vigilance.

Figure 3 shows the full trajectories, and Figure 4 presents the aggregated bar comparison with error bars. The scaffolded autonomy trajectory shows a distinctive pattern: initial skill decline is similar to other conditions, but as the AI reduces its assistance in response to growing skill, a virtuous cycle emerges where increasing practice drives faster skill growth.

3.3 Experiment 3: The Reliability Paradox

Figure 5 reveals a counterintuitive finding: **higher AI reliability increases deskilling risk**. As AI reliability increases from 0.50 to 0.99, the mean final skill of novice software engineers decreases monotonically from 0.053 to 0.047. More critically, deskilling traps emerge abruptly at a reliability threshold of approximately **0.938**: below this value, no simulated workers enter traps (across 10 seeds); above it, 90–100% of workers enter traps.

The mechanism is twofold. First, more reliable AI produces fewer errors, so workers encounter fewer calibration opportunities, and

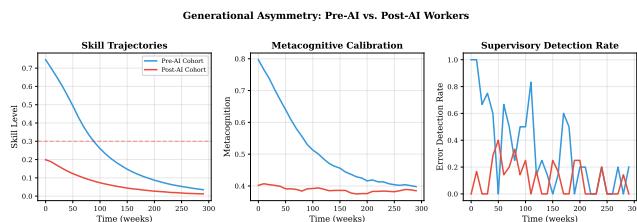


Figure 6: Generational asymmetry over 300 weeks. Pre-AI workers (blue, initial skill 0.75) maintain higher skill, metacognition, and detection rates than post-AI workers (red, initial skill 0.20) throughout the simulation. By week 90, the pre-AI cohort's skill drops below the supervision threshold (0.3), while the post-AI cohort falls below it by week 20. The metacognition gap persists, with pre-AI workers retaining substantially better self-assessment calibration.

metacognition decays through complacency. Second, fewer detected errors increase perceived AI quality, driving reliance upward, further reducing practice opportunities. This creates a vicious cycle that the worker cannot escape once metacognition drops below the self-awareness threshold.

This finding has profound implications: the most dangerous AI systems for human skill maintenance are not the unreliable ones (which force human engagement) but the highly reliable ones (which enable complete disengagement). This is precisely the paradox identified by Bainbridge [3]: the more reliable the automation, the less prepared the human operator when it fails.

3.4 Experiment 4: Generational Asymmetry

Figure 6 compares two cohorts over 300 weeks: pre-AI workers (initial skill 0.75, began career without AI) and post-AI workers (initial skill 0.20, always had AI). The pre-AI cohort begins with substantially higher skill and maintains a persistent advantage throughout the simulation, despite both cohorts experiencing continuous skill decline.

At week 90, the pre-AI cohort's skill crosses the 0.3 supervision threshold (0.294), while the post-AI cohort falls below this threshold by week 20 (having started below it). The metacognition gap is equally stark: the pre-AI cohort maintains metacognition above 0.40 throughout, while the post-AI cohort hovers around 0.38–0.40 but with lower absolute skill, producing substantially lower error detection rates.

By week 290, the pre-AI cohort has skill 0.035 with metacognition 0.398, while the post-AI cohort has skill 0.012 with metacognition 0.385. Although both trajectories ultimately converge toward low skill, the pre-AI cohort maintains approximately 3× higher skill even after 300 weeks, suggesting that the initial skill buffer acquired before AI adoption provides lasting (though diminishing) supervisory advantage.

This asymmetry has direct workforce implications: organizations cannot rely on a new generation of “AI-native” workers to develop supervisory skills organically. Deliberate training programs that include unassisted practice are essential for workers who have always had AI available.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Key Findings

Our simulation study produces five principal findings with policy relevance:

1. Deskilling traps are real and domain-dependent. The model identifies specific parameter regimes where workers lose both competence and awareness of incompetence. Aviation is uniquely vulnerable: all experience levels enter traps due to the combination of very high AI reliability (reducing error signals) and high skill decay rate (from lack of manual practice). Medicine shows intermediate vulnerability, with novices particularly at risk.

2. The reliability paradox. More reliable AI is paradoxically more dangerous for skill maintenance. A critical threshold exists (approximately 0.938 for our software engineering calibration) above which deskilling traps become nearly certain. This directly challenges the intuition that better AI is uniformly beneficial.

3. Scaffolded autonomy is dramatically effective. Among the four interventions tested, scaffolded autonomy—where AI reduces its assistance as worker skill grows—produces a 20-fold improvement in final skill level. The key mechanism is restoring the practice signal: by forcing graduated independence, the intervention breaks the positive feedback loop between high reliance and skill decay.

4. Adversarial training improves metacognition but not skill. Deliberately injecting errors improves metacognitive calibration (0.448 vs. 0.388) and reduces total harm by 10.4%, but does not restore the practice volume needed for skill growth. This suggests that error detection and skill acquisition are partially independent processes.

5. Generational asymmetry is persistent. Workers who developed skills before AI adoption maintain approximately 3× higher skill than “AI-native” workers even after 300 weeks of identical conditions. This gap, while narrowing over time, suggests that pre-AI skill acquisition provides a lasting supervisory advantage that cannot be replicated by AI-assisted experience alone.

4.2 Limitations

Our model makes several simplifying assumptions. First, domain parameters are calibrated from literature estimates rather than empirical measurement; the precise location of deskilling thresholds depends on these calibrations. Second, the model assumes homogeneous workers within each experience category; real workforces exhibit substantial individual variation in learning rates, metacognitive ability, and disposition toward AI reliance. Third, the model treats AI capability as static; in practice, AI systems improve over time, which may shift the supervisory challenge. Fourth, social and organizational factors (incentives, peer learning, institutional memory) are not modeled but likely play significant roles. Finally, as a computational model, our results generate predictions that require empirical validation through longitudinal studies.

4.3 Policy Implications

For organizations deploying AI: implement scaffolded autonomy where AI gradually reduces assistance as workers demonstrate competence. At minimum, mandate periodic unassisted assessment to monitor supervisory skill.

581 **For training program designers:** include deliberate unassisted
 582 practice modules, especially for workers who entered the profession
 583 with AI assistance. The generational asymmetry finding suggests
 584 that “AI-native” workers need qualitatively different training from
 585 those who developed skills before AI adoption.

586 **For regulators in safety-critical domains:** the aviation results
 587 are particularly concerning. Current regulations mandate manual
 588 flying proficiency checks for pilots using autopilot; analogous
 589 requirements may be needed in other domains where AI is sup-
 590 planting human judgment (e.g., medical diagnosis, financial risk
 591 assessment). The reliability paradox suggests that regulatory at-
 592 tention should focus precisely on the most reliable AI systems, as
 593 these pose the greatest deskilling risk.

5 CONCLUSION

594 We have presented a formal dynamical systems model of supervi-
 595 sory skill evolution under AI assistance and used it to investigate the
 596 open question of whether AI assistance hinders the development of
 597 skills needed to supervise automated tasks. Our computational ex-
 598 periments reveal that the answer is conditionally affirmative: under
 599 realistic parameter regimes, AI assistance produces deskilling traps
 600 where workers lose both supervisory competence and awareness of
 601 their incompetence. The severity depends on domain characteris-
 602 tics, with high-reliability AI domains being paradoxically the most
 603 dangerous.

604 The most promising mitigation is scaffolded autonomy, which
 605 achieves near-complete skill preservation by coupling AI assistance
 606 reduction to skill growth. This finding points toward a design prin-
 607 ciple for human-AI systems: the AI should be designed not only
 608 to maximize immediate task performance but also to maintain the
 609 human skills needed for oversight.

610 Our model generates testable predictions about deskilling dy-
 611 namics, reliability thresholds, and intervention effectiveness that
 612 can be evaluated through longitudinal field studies. We hope this
 613 work motivates such empirical investigations and informs the de-
 614 sign of AI deployment policies that account for long-term human
 615 skill sustainability.

616 All simulation code is available for reproducibility. The model
 617 parameters can be recalibrated as empirical data on skill dynamics
 618 under AI assistance becomes available.

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