Voices on Work:

AI use by young job seekers in Western Sydney

SVA

Acknowledgment of Country

Social Ventures Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work.

'After the Rains' by Richard Seden for Saltwater People 2024

Project acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

In the [Rebuilding the Career Ladder](#) program, SVA works with employers to attract and retain young people, particularly those who struggle to access good quality employment. In the course of this work, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become an unavoidable topic. In employment discussions, the focus is often on how AI will reshape jobs and how employers are adopting AI in recruitment, rather than how young people themselves are engaging with these tools. This report examines how young people are using AI tools in the job application process and what this means for fairness and access to work opportunities, with a particular focus on young people from less privileged backgrounds. From August to November 2025, we engaged 63 young people through interviews, focus groups and a survey. Our primary qualitative insights come from interviews and focus groups with socioeconomically disadvantaged young people based in Western Sydney with no university experience, complemented by contextual insights from university students in Sydney. We explored how young people use tools such as ChatGPT and other AI enabled supports in job seeking.

Overall, young job seekers in Western Sydney reported very limited use of AI in job applications, often reflecting low confidence and uncertainty about what counts as appropriate use. The university student reference cohort, by contrast, described more regular and practical use, supported by greater exposure to guidance about acceptable use. The findings also suggest that AI is shaping how young people interpret recruitment itself. In an already challenging job seeking environment, lack of transparency about employer use of AI can increase uncertainty and reduce trust, making young people less confident about how to approach the application process.

Overall, the findings suggest AI is becoming a new layer of inequality in job seeking. AI tools may improve the effectiveness of job seeking, but only if young people have access to clear guidance and feel confident using them. We therefore recommend reliable guidance, transparent employer practices and targeted support for young people outside higher education, so that AI does not widen existing gaps in confidence and opportunity.

Background and aim

Youth underemployment in Australia and the need for a socioeconomic lens

Australia continues to experience persistent youth unemployment and underemployment. As of June 2025, the unemployment rate for young Australians (aged 15–24) was 9.6%, compared with 4.2% for the broader working-age population[1]. Even when overall unemployment was relatively low (3.4% in 2022), youth underemployment remained high at 14.1%, compared with 6.0% overall[2]. These figures indicate that young people are disproportionately concentrated in insecure, insufficient or non-standard work. Early exposure to underemployment and non-standard employment is also associated with substantial long-term wage penalties[3]. Improving young people's access to quality jobs is therefore not only an employment issue, but a critical dimension of long-term economic equity.

A socioeconomic lens helps ensure this equity focus. SVA notes that many Australian employers have "no line of sight" on class or economic inclusion, which means employment practices may unintentionally lock capable young people out of opportunity[4]. For this reason, this report adopts a socioeconomic lens in examining how AI is shaping young people's pathways into work.

AI and inequality

Public discussion often frames Artificial Intelligence (AI) in two competing ways: as a force that widens inequality, or one that helps to equalise opportunity. In principle, AI tools[5] should make job seeking easier by assisting job research, improving professional communication and widening access to support that is otherwise expensive or difficult to obtain, such as career coaching. However, emerging evidence suggests these benefits are not automatic. They depend on whether people can access the tools, understand how to use them, and feel safe and confident about using them.

International evidence[6] shows that while most young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) reported knowing what generative AI is (85.5%), only around half of them had knowingly used it (48.6%). Use in job applications was even lower: 26.6% had used AI in some steps of the application process; only 14.5% had used it to help complete application materials such as a CV or cover letter. Hesitancy was shaped strongly by perceived legitimacy: 48.6% believed that using AI in the application process would make an employer less likely to hire them. Among those who had not used AI, common reasons included not thinking it would be useful, concerns about responsible use, not knowing how to use it, and lack of access.

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025, July 17). Labour Force, Australia, June 2025. Media Release. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release

[2] Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, August 18). Unemployment rate falls to 3.4%. Media Release. https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/unemployment-rate-falls-34

[3] Fauser, S., & Mooi-Reci, I. (2025). Non-standard employment and underemployment at labor market entry and their impact on later wage trajectories. *Human Relations*, *78*(3), 249–278.

[4] https://www.socialventures.org.au/our-impact/we-need-to-talk-about-class/

[5] AI is a fast-evolving field and the term is used in different ways. In this report, "AI tools" refers to commonly available, public-facing generative AI programs used by jobseekers, such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini, as they are generally understood in everyday use.

[6] Movement to Work. (2024). *Levelling the playing field: Exploring the potential of generative AI to support NEET young people into work*.

This suggests that "digital exclusion" is not only a technical issue. It reflects deeper inequalities in education, employment, and access to trusted guidance. In a context where expectations about AI use are still evolving, and high-profile stories about misuse circulate widely, some people may choose caution. For young people facing socioeconomic disadvantage, this creates a dilemma: avoiding irresponsible use matters but opting out entirely may also mean missing out on forms of support that could strengthen applications and confidence.

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with young job seekers facing disadvantage in Western Sydney, we explore how they use AI in job seeking and how they make sense of it, including their perceptions, concerns, and decision-making. By setting this analysis alongside interviews and survey findings from university students in Sydney as a reference point, we consider what these patterns mean for equity and access in the job market.

Research approach

Participants were recruited through broad channels. We extended invitations through SVA's Youth Consultants network and our community partner organisations to reach young people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds in Western Sydney[7]. We engaged 13 participants through in-depth interviews and focus groups to understand their experiences and perspectives. To provide a contextual reference point, we also interviewed and surveyed a total of 50 undergraduate and postgraduate university students in Sydney. All participants were aged between 18 and 30 years. We used this slightly broader age range because many young people experience an extended early career phase, with prolonged study commitments and unstable labour market conditions delaying transitions into stable employment and adulthood.

We coded interviews and focus groups with disadvantaged young people to identify key themes in their experiences of AI in job seeking. We then used the university student cohort as a contextual reference point to note similarities and differences.

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[7] We use a broader understanding of socioeconomic disadvantage, including experiences of poverty, living in lower SES areas (as indicated by SEIFA), no university experience, and precarious work or unemployment. To protect participants' anonymity, we do not disclose individual-level characteristics in this report.

Findings

Insight 1: Very limited use of AI in job applications among young people facing disadvantage in Western Sydney

Across the cohort of young people facing socioeconomical disadvantage ("the primary cohort"), use of AI in job applications ranged from minimal to none. Some participants had not used AI at all despite actively job seeking.

> "I have been looking for [jobs for] a while. I haven't used AI at all."

Where AI was considered, it was often framed as a distant support tool used with great level of caution rather than an assistant to work with to enhance application content. Some participants saw the potential value of AI as a reviewer but drew a clear line at letting it assist their writing.

> "I think it could be a useful tool to look over my application and point out places where I could improve, but I would be scared to let it write for me."

> "In each of those job [applications], I have used AI, but only for a template of what I should write, example for, like, cover letter or how to improve my resume in terms of layout design and not the content within it."

This suggests that low uptake is not simply about whether young people have heard of AI. It is also shaped by hesitation about how AI should be used in a job application, and what counts as acceptable or authentic self-representation. For some, the safest option is to avoid AI use altogether, even when they recognise it could improve their work.

In contrast, university students described more frequent use of AI in job applications and spoke more fluently about how to use it with nuanced considerations. They emphasised using AI to refine and polish while keeping ownership of the content, for example by providing the information themselves and using AI to reword or reformat.

> "I wouldn't ask AI to provide with the information. I would provide it to AI and mainly just to reword or possibly reformat things."

> "I use Chat GPT to go over my work… help me with my resume."

These accounts point to an emerging divide: not only in access to tools, but in access to confidence and "how-to" knowledge about legitimate use. While university students described AI as something they could control and direct to improve presentation, the primary cohort participants were more likely to see AI as either unusable or potentially risky. This offers insights into why some young people may choose not to use AI tools even when this could help them in job seeking.

Insight 2: Job seeking already feels impersonal and opaque, and AI can make that worse

Job seeking already feels distant, confusing and difficult to navigate for many young people, especially those further from the labour market[8]. Young job seekers described how alienating and demoralising it is to submit applications and never hear back, which can create a sense of not being treated with dignity or genuinely considered by employers. Awareness that employers may be using AI or automation shaped how participants experienced and made sense of recruitment more broadly. In the absence of clear information, AI became a plausible explanation for rejection or silence, deepening an already strong perception that the process lacks humanity and transparency.

One participant described a sense that their application was not being read by a person.

> "It just doesn't feel like a human is getting my application."

Another participant contrasted their recent experiences with job searching in the past and linked the decline in responses to the rise of AI.

> "When I was applying for jobs three years ago, when I had so much less experience, I got so many more responses. It seems like after AI is a big thing, I'm just not getting no responses at all."

Participants also described job advertisements and application processes as becoming harder to interpret, more formal, and filled with unfamiliar language. Some associated these changes with employers using AI to produce content.

> "[Job application process] used to be shorter. It used to just be like … this is what you're doing, and this is what we want [you to do] … and now it's like, you know … [employers] they put hard words and stuff [in their AI generated job ads]."

The key point here is not whether each participant's attribution is factually correct. It is that, in the absence of transparency, young people are making sense of their job seeking experiences through the lens of AI. When recruitment feels opaque and outcomes are hard to interpret, AI becomes a plausible explanation for why processes feel less personal, why responses are scarce, and why opportunities feel less accessible. This matters for equity because perceptions shape behaviour. If young job seekers experience AI as something being used on them without clarity, it can further reduce trust in the system and make them less willing to engage with AI tools on their own terms.

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[8] Mackaway, J., & Amigo, M. F. (2022). *Young people in Western Sydney's voices on work* (Rebuilding the Career Ladder Initiative). Social Ventures Australia.

Insight 3: AI as a stranger: myths, fear and mistrust

Looking more closely at the accounts shared by young people facing disadvantage, minimal AI use and speculation of AI implications are rarely just a matter of preference or opinion. It is often rooted in uncertainty about what AI actually is, what it can and cannot do, and what risks might come with using it. For some, AI appears as a powerful but poorly understood presence that they are expected to navigate without reliable guidance.

> "I think there's a lot of fear because it's just … what even is it?"

> "I don't really know how to use AI properly, like the most I get is like you talk to a machine and it just spit stuff back at you. I don't really know."

- **Fear is linked to uncertainty and lack of control**

Participants' fear was not expressed as technophobia. It was more often framed as uncertainty and loss of control, a sense that they do not know what is happening behind the tool, or what the consequences of use might be.

> "I feel like it's not exactly secure, I guess."

This sense of insecurity is important to be recognised because it pushes young people towards caution. When a tool feels unfamiliar and ungoverned, opting out can feel like the responsible option.

- **AI is moralised, and non-use can be a decision of integrity**

Alongside uncertainty, some participants from the primary cohort described AI in moral terms, as something that could compromise authenticity or weaken their own capability over time.

> "[If you use AI,] your skills are probably going to reduce somewhat."

> "I always feel a lot of guilt when I'm using it."

These comments suggest that for some participants, AI is not simply a productivity tool. It carries moral weight. The decision to use or not use AI becomes a decision about integrity, self-reliance, and what counts as legitimate effort.

- **Information sources are fragmented, which amplifies myths and fear**

A key difference between the primary cohort of our report and the university student reference group is where their understanding of AI comes from. Several described learning about AI through social media, family and friends, and occasional news stories, rather than structured guidance.

> "[I get information about AI from] the news on Facebook, so usually something pops up on Facebook feed or if I hear about it from my friend or family."

> "I remember the news where AI convinced someone to do really bad things."

In this information environment, extreme or negative stories can become a dominant reference point, especially when participants do not have access to trusted explanations or opportunities to practise safe use. This can reinforce the sense of AI as a mythic stranger that cannot be evaluated objectively or used with confidence.

Participants also described everyday experiences that illustrate how difficult it can be to learn through trial and error when you do not have a strong foundation of knowledge.

> "One day, I want this specific information that I can't find online. I wanted a programme that could tell me how to solve the Rubik's cube from a specific pattern. So I asked ChatGPT … I had no idea it wouldn't even work. I thought it would give me the answer, but it didn't. So I stopped using it."

The issue here is not simply that AI sometimes fails. It is that participants may not know how to diagnose the failure and adjust their approach, which can quickly undermine their interest in exploring the tools.

- **Lack of institutional support leaves young people to guess**

Ideally, even without formal education pathways, young people should be able to build skills through learning on the job and receiving guidance from more experienced colleagues. However, when it comes to AI, this on-the-job pathway can be more difficult, particularly in smaller or more traditional workplaces where senior staff may not be using these tools themselves. One participant noted:

> "In relation to the usage of AI, my workplace has not given any guidance. The guy who owns the [place where I work] is a little older and old school."

This absence of guidance matters because it leaves young people to infer norms from incomplete sources. In this context, caution and avoidance are understandable, especially when the perceived risks include being judged, doing something wrong, or becoming dependent on a tool they do not understand.

- **Compare with the university student cohort**

University students did not claim to fully understand AI, but they appeared to have more exposure to institutional guidance about it. They rarely expressed confusion about what AI is; instead, they more often wanted clearer, practical instruction on how to use it appropriately and productively.

> "We get told how much we can use [AI] and that we have to be careful of how much we use and we need to make sure that we cite everything that we have used."

> "Nowadays, AI becoming like more and more common tool… Now they've given you copyright conversations about AI tools that you're using. So… if you used inspiration from an AI tool, an AI generated photo, you now have to include that in your citations."

While university students also expressed mixed and ambivalent feelings about AI, they tended to land in a more pragmatic, realistic position, treating AI as something to navigate and use within boundaries rather than something to avoid altogether.

> "I was quite hesitant to use it at first. It scared me… [but then] realised that I'm going to be so far behind if I don't [use it]."

> "It's quite a taboo thing. Everyone knows they use it, but no one really wants to say it."

By contrast, some participants from our primary cohort expressed a more categorical rejection:

> "[I want] nothing to do with AI. I'd rather do everything, you know, the normal way. Write things out from my mind."

> "I feel like it would be a lot better if AI just never existed for everyone."

Insight 4: What young people want is not hype, but clarity and practical support

As shown in earlier themes, negative sentiment and resistance towards AI often reflected the challenges of navigating a rapidly changing technology with uneven access to reliable information, guidance, and opportunities to practise. In this context, frustration and confusion are understandable responses, especially for young people who are further from formal education or tech-enabled workplaces. In this context, both the primary cohort of participants and the university students of this study raised equity concerns not about access to tools, but about access to guidance, transparency, and governance.

A clear equity issue raised by university students was that AI may not be "equal" even when it appears widely available. One participant noted that while tools like ChatGPT are free to use, paid versions can offer extra features that may give some applicants extra advantage in job application.

> "There is ChatGPT, which is accessible to pretty much everyone since it's free. However, there is a premium subscription service for ChatGPT that could give me even more benefits. It will make you look even better than people who are using it for free. So there's definitely an unfair element towards using AI."

Students also pointed to the need for rules and oversight to prevent AI from becoming an unrestrained advantage for some and a barrier for others.

> "I think there has to be laws. So like government has to intervene in some way. They have to moderate the use of AI. So everybody, at least has a semi equal chance at it."

Young people facing disadvantage raised parallel concerns, but their emphasis was often more practical: they wanted transparency from employers about how AI is used in recruitment, and access to basic learning opportunities so that they could engage confidently and responsibly.

> "I think employers do have to be more transparent about if they use AI, if so, when, how is it gonna be used? You know, like … a rubric, they could provide."

> "I feel like there needs to be some kind of AI course or it needs to be taught somewhere."

They also signalled that trust is a precondition for adoption. Some participants indicated they would be willing to use it if it were clearly governed and safe.

> "If there's a way that we can create this, this trustworthy well governed, safe, useful kind of tool like. I would be on board with using that."

Taken together, these accounts suggest that improving equity is not simply a matter of providing wider access to tools or encouraging more AI use. What young people are asking for is clarity and support: clear expectations about what is acceptable, transparent employer practices about where AI is used, and practical guidance on how to use AI safely and responsibly. Without these foundations, AI is likely to advantage those who already have stronger confidence and institutional support, rather than expanding fair access.

Discussion

This project highlights that, for young people facing disadvantage, AI is currently not experienced as a straightforward advantage in job seeking. This sits alongside national evidence that young adults are, overall, the heaviest users of generative AI. The 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII)[9] reports that 69.1% of 18–34-year-olds have recently used a generative AI tool. At the same time, uptake is uneven by education. People with a bachelor's degree report much higher use (62%) than those who have completed high school (37.2%), and those who left school at Year 10 (4.2%). Our findings help unpack what can sit behind these gaps. For young job seekers facing socioeconomic disadvantage, lower AI uptake reflects more than uneven access to devices, connectivity, and paid features. Even where basic access exists, many young people are uncertain about what counts as acceptable or appropriate use of AI tools in job applications. This means that simply making tools and devices available is unlikely to close gaps. It is also important whether young people have access to clear, trustworthy guidance and feel confident navigating the evolving technological and ethical issues surrounding AI use.

The findings also reinforce that transparency and clear communication from employers matter even more as AI becomes embedded in recruitment. Employers who want to attract and retain young people can reduce uncertainty by setting clear expectations about their recruitment processes, including where and how AI is used to review, process, or assist decisions about applications. They can also clarify what candidates are being assessed on, what is required, and whether and to what extent AI use is acceptable when preparing applications and interview responses. Employers should provide simple and explicit guidance with examples on what they consider appropriate AI use to help applicants navigate this evolving field more confidently.

This project provides practical insights for community partners, employment services and government on what support is likely to make a difference. Young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those outside formal education or tech-savvy workplaces, often encounter AI information that is mixed, confusing, or absent. Beyond access to devices and tools, they want practical learning opportunities that build confidence and capability in real job seeking tasks. This includes how to use AI to improve applications while keeping their own voice, clear dos and don'ts for responsible use, and basic skills to check outputs, troubleshoot issues, and recognise risks when things go wrong. Because AI tools and norms are still evolving, this guidance needs to be ongoing rather than one-off.

Employment services and community partners may need to upskill their own staff so that AI related job application guidance is practical, current, and consistent, rather than leaving young people to rely on ad hoc sources. Research by the Australian Welfare and Work Lab[10] found that around 30% of frontline Workforce Australia staff (including employment consultants, advisers and case managers) held no post-school qualification, and that few received external training through their employer. They, themselves, may have limited familiarity with or skills in use of AI tools. As AI becomes more embedded in job applications and recruitment, targeted upskilling is therefore urgent to ensure services can provide reliable advice. As our findings show, without quality support, some young

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[9] Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. (2025). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index.* Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

[10] Ball, S., Carter, C., Considine, M., Lewis, JM. McGann, M., and Nguyen, P. (2023) *The New Digital Governance of Welfare-to-Work: Industry Report on Survey of Workforce Australia Frontline Staff*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

people may use AI in ways that undermine their applications, while others may avoid it altogether, widening existing gaps in confidence and access to work opportunities. Employment services are a key point of contact for young job seekers outside formal education, and therefore a crucial place to close this gap. In a job seeking environment where young people already describe feeling alienated by silence or limited feedback, increased automation and unclear expectations can further reduce opportunities to learn what went wrong and improve over time.

We also note that access to fit for purpose technology cannot be assumed. While participants in this study often described access to devices as a non-issue, national data suggests digital exclusion remains a challenge for some groups. The 2025 ADII reports that 20.6% of Australians are digitally excluded or highly excluded, rising to 54.5% among people who did not complete secondary school and 45.2% among public housing residents. It also notes that some Australians rely only on mobile connections, and that smartphones may support basic participation, but work and study tasks often require a desktop or laptop computer. Although computers should be available through employment services or public facilities such as libraries, access may not be consistent, private, or unrestricted for preparing applications.

Overall, the findings suggest that AI is becoming part of the "hidden rules" of job applications. If those rules are only learned in universities or through enclosed networks, then young people outside those systems are more likely to be left guessing. Employers and community partners that make expectations explicit, communicate quality information, and provide practical support will be better placed to expand fair access to work opportunities for all young people.

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