

Harnessing Artificial Intelligence to Transform the Economic Development Ecosystem

How economic development organizations can harness AI responsibly while protecting the trust they have built.

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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence has moved from idea to practice in economic development. It is reshaping how regions compete, plan, and deliver results. For the economic development organizations, it is changing:

- **services** provided to clients,
- **internal operations** that keep organizations running, and
- **research and analysis** that inform business, community, and organizational decisions.

For practitioners, the question is how to use AI appropriately while managing its risks.

Used well, we are already finding that AI extends what an economic development organization can do. It can tailor outreach to more businesses and investors, turn large datasets into usable analysis, and help design and assess programs faster. **Used carelessly**, it can raise costs and erode the trust an organization has built with the businesses and stakeholders it serves.

Economic development organizations (EDOs) are participating in a larger transformation underway in the American economy. Nearly half of U.S. workers now use AI at work at least occasionally, and a majority do so in knowledge-based roles (Gallup, 2025). Like other general-purpose technologies (GPTs), including electricity and computers, AI's benefits will truly arrive only after organizations redesign how they work (Brynjolfsson, Rock, & Syverson, 2021). Yet a 2026 survey found that only a minority of business organizations are leveraging AI to change their work processes, and an AI skills gap is the top barrier to integration (Deloitte, 2026).

Redesigning work for our practice is where leadership matters most. For economic developers to advance AI's benefits, their organizations must also take full advantage of the benefits of AI and manage the risks. But most are not ready. They need help navigating the tools, gathering and circulating what works best, and moving the field toward shared standards.

Why This Matters to Our Field

As most economists will attest, a region's prosperity depends on how well its firms and workers adopt the tools that raise productivity. For the nonprofits and public agencies that serve economic development, AI is the most consequential of those tools in a generation. Helping businesses in their region adopt it well is squarely their work.

AI is already in the hands of economic development practitioners and business alike. Nearly half of U.S. employees now report using AI at work at least a few times a year, and a majority do so in professional and analytical roles like those these organizations employ (Gallup, 2025). AI tools draft reports, summarize documents, and analyze large datasets, which is much of what an economic development office produces every day.

The evidence on workers should shape how these organizations advise the businesses they serve. Occupational churn in the U.S. labor market remains modest by historical standards, and through mid-2025 the occupations most exposed to AI showed no measurable employment decline relative to the least exposed (Deming, Ong, & Summers, 2025; Deming, 2025). The sharper finding concerns wages: when AI absorbs the routine work around a job's expert core, **workers gain**; when it absorbs the expert core itself, **wages erode** even where jobs remain (Autor & Thompson, 2025). For an economic development organization advising employers on talent and location decisions, the question is not whether jobs disappear. It is which tasks change, and how to help local employers and their workforce partners adapt.

Likewise, we should consider these same points in thinking about the EDO of tomorrow. Two lessons come to mind for economic development practitioners. First, the EDOs that do the hard work of adapting early will help their regions pull ahead of those that wait. Second, the **advantage comes from the redesign**, not the tool. Buying access to AI is easy. This is not about having AI do what you would have otherwise done. This is about **harnessing AI to rebuild and redesign work** in our practice in ways that create value. Doing that requires leadership.

A third lesson is now emerging from practice. As AI tools improve at interpreting plain-language intent, generic AI instruction and standalone prompt engineering are losing value. The worth of these AI tools increasingly folds into the judgment of the person applying the tools. AI and algorithms act as complements to domain expertise, and they create the most value when the domain experts themselves can interpret and apply them rather than relying on separate technical specialists (Tambe, 2025). For EDOs concerned about their delivery staff, the advantage goes to training anchored in a practitioner's craft. For instance, that might be teaching a strong analyst to use AI to understand their region's economic performance or opportunity. It also might be using AI to conduct more thorough due diligence on potential projects, or any of a number of other tasks that we always wished we could do but could never find the time.

Artificial Intelligence as a General-Purpose Technology

AI is a broad term. It covers any software that performs tasks once thought to require human intelligence. The tools this paper discusses sit inside one branch of that field. This paper focuses on the AI tools that help economic development practitioners work more efficiently and do work that previously was not possible.

A large language model, or LLM, is a system trained on vast amounts of text to predict and produce language. ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are LLMs. AI agents are LLMs connected to other software so they can execute actions using other platforms.

Setting up an agent is straightforward in principle. A user starts with a platform that supports one, gives it instructions and context, and connects it to the data or tools the task requires. The exact steps differ by platform and change with each update. Training on these tools needs to be continuous, not a one-time event.

The barrier to entry is almost nonexistent. Most AI companies offer capable models, some free of charge. EDO staff can begin using them without any organizational decision, and many already have. Looking at a broader set of companies, Gallup found that nearly a quarter of workers do not know whether their employer has integrated AI into work processes, which suggests that personal, unmanaged use is widespread (Gallup, 2025). This is the central fact for economic development leaders. The choice is not whether AI enters your organization, but whether it enters with guidance.

Take a moment. Have you calculated the risks that widespread, unguided adoption is creating for your organization?

Opportunities

AI changes economic development work on three fronts: the services an organization provides to client businesses, the operations that keep it running, and the research that informs its decisions. Being AI savvy in these areas help EDOs serve their firms and workers more effectively and presents the EDO as an early adopter. Without this credibility, how can EDOs expect to help companies in their regions manage the AI adoption process?

Services to Clients

AI lets an organization personalize outreach at scale. An agent can match communications to the characteristics of individual businesses or investors, which strengthens recruitment and retention efforts. A task that once took hours or days can be done through a handful of queries. The evidence associated with these gains is now solid. In a study of more than 5,000 customer-service agents, access to an AI assistant raised the number of issues resolved per hour by 14 percent, with the largest gains going to less-experienced staff (Brynjolfsson, Li, & Raymond, 2023). A randomized study

of professional writing tasks found AI cut completion time by 40 percent while raising quality (Noy & Zhang, 2023).

Imagine how this kind of productivity improvement could help economic developers extend their reach to more companies to enhance their impact on economic growth. There is a catch, however. **When every organization can produce tailored outreach at scale**, the outreach itself no longer sets any single organization apart.

Genuine relationships and human connections matter even more in an AI world. A human being should review every client-facing product before it goes out. AI should free staff to participate in more high-value in-person conversations where they can help build trust.

Internal Operations

AI can absorb much of the routine work that fills a staff member's day. Slide creation, note-taking, scheduling, summarizing long documents, and first-pass research are all within reach. AI tools can also interpret large datasets quickly and surface patterns across separate sources. Used here, AI is a partner in designing better programs and tracking results.

The same caution applies. A summary produced in seconds can misread its source. A pattern reported across datasets can reflect noise rather than a true signal. It is invaluable to keep a person in the loop to check AI output against what an experienced person may already know. The aim is stronger work, not faster error. Your EDO's credibility is at stake whenever you distribute something that you are not ready to stand behind fully.

Research and Analysis

Even tasks that once required hours of dedicated expertise, such as data collection, cleaning, and analysis, can now be performed by frontier models. This frees analysts to focus on judgment and interpretation, something AI cannot yet do well. The risk, however, is that unskilled AI users believe that they can avoid the need for in-depth data analyst who have the expert judgment about what constitutes truly valuable insights rather than AI hallucination. AI works best with expert judgment guiding it.

Regional Diffusion

The largest opportunity sits beyond any single organization. Firms that use AI to raise productivity and shorten product cycles pull ahead of those that do not, so regions that help their key industries adopt it gain an edge (CREC, 2026). This gives economic developers a growing role in (1) identifying which local industries stand to benefit most and (2) connecting them to the right resources, training, and technical assistance. Smaller firms are the priority, because they rarely have the capacity to evaluate these tools alone. Reynolds (2025) names adoption at scale among smaller manufacturers, not innovation itself, as the central U.S. hurdle. National data bear this out because adoption climbs from under 20 percent at the smallest businesses to 37 percent at the

largest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). Closing that gap strengthens the whole region, but EDOs must be AI literate to be helpful.

To close this gap will require a broker. Federal policy now assigns the AI brokering role to regional organizations by name. America's AI Action Plan directs the Departments of Labor, Education, and Commerce and the National Science Foundation to prioritize AI skills across career and technical education, WIOA programs, and registered apprenticeships (White House, 2025). The national talent strategy calls for regional AI learning networks built on employer-led partnerships (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025), and the Department's AI Literacy Framework gives program designers a common structure to build against (U.S. Department of Labor, 2026). EDOs are in the mix throughout.

Funding for this role is following: the EDA's \$25 million AI Upskill Accelerator finances employer-led regional partnerships that reskill workers for AI (U.S. Economic Development Administration, 2026), and the National Science Foundation funds a coordination hub in every state and territory to convene education, workforce, industry, and government partners around AI readiness (National Science Foundation, 2026). Economic developers are well positioned to broker these coalitions, with workforce partners central to the effort. Both must be AI-savvy to add value.

As AI lowers the cost of tasks that once required scale, it also opens room for new firms and new business models. A region benefits when its economic developers back the entrepreneurs who act on those openings, and when they work with their workforce partners to build the AI-ready talent those new firms will need. Again, to be a credible advocate and adviser on AI issues, EDOs must be learned adopters of the technology and seen as credible partners, collaborators, and even leaders.

Managing the Tradeoffs

AI creates real risks alongside its gains. Ordinary situations may not require bad intent, but they can lead to increased cost or eroded trust. Here are a few examples:

- **Confidentiality.** A staff member pastes a prospective company's confidential expansion plans into a free AI tool to speed up a proposal. The tool retains that data. The organization has now exposed information it received under a nondisclosure agreement. This is particularly problematic in cases in which an analyst is evaluating grant award proposals, program impact data, or employer records.
- **Reliability.** A program officer asks an AI agent to produce a labor market profile for a board report. The model invents a wage figure and a citation to match. The officer misses the hallucination, the report goes out, a partner checks the number, and the organization's reputation for reliable data takes a hit. This risk is not hypothetical. By mid-2026, one database had tracked more than 1,600 court

decisions worldwide involving AI hallucinations in filings, chiefly fabricated citations. (Charlotin, 2026). The lesson transfers directly to a field in which credibility rests on accurate data.

- **Contractual compliance.** An analyst runs incentives grant deliverable data into an AI tool without realizing the tool's terms allow reuse of uploaded content. The grant agreement explicitly prohibits sharing protected data, putting the organization in breach of its contract. Increasingly, organizations are restricting or prohibiting AI use on projects involving confidential or protected data.
- **Cybersecurity threats.** As AI tools connect to more systems and datasets, they widen the number of potential entry points for cyberattacks. Data protection, contract compliance, and cybersecurity are becoming closely interconnected, requiring organizations to manage them as part of a single AI governance strategy.
- **Procurement and data terms.** A free tool and a paid enterprise tool can look identical and treat data very differently. The terms of service decide whether an organization's inputs are retained, used to train the vendor's models, or shared. Before adopting a tool for real work, read those terms and prefer options that contractually exclude your data from training and retention. Price is rarely the deciding factor, but data handling is.
- **Commoditized outreach.** Outreach that everyone can automate loses its edge because it becomes commonplace. This tradeoff is strategic rather than technical, and it points back to the enduring value of human relationships.
- **Fairness and access.** The benefits of AI are not evenly available to those who need them. Adoption climbs steeply with firm size, so the small businesses that anchor most local economies risk falling behind the large firms that can staff and fund it. The constraint is sharpest for rural firms, where limited or costly broadband puts the tools out of reach even when the interest is there (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2026). An EDO advances fairness by treating access as part of the work: by helping smaller firms evaluate and adopt AI and by folding broadband and digital-infrastructure gaps into the region's competitiveness agenda so no community is left on the wrong side of the divide.

The pattern across these risks is consistent. AI is fast and capable, but it does not understand the stakes of the task like a human does. Guidelines, combined with conversation and practice, exist to keep the speed of AI from outrunning the judgment that protects the organization.

Questions Economic Development Leaders Should Be Asking

- *Is responsible AI use a priority for our organization, or are we leaving it to chance?*
- *Where is AI already being used in our work, and do we know how?*
- *What confidential or contractually protected data could be exposed through the tools our staff use?*
- *Which client-facing products and services carry the most risk if an AI error slips through, and how do we verify them?*
- *Which local industries stand to gain most from AI, and what is our role in helping them adopt it?*
- *How will we keep our guidance current as the tools change?*
- *How will we know whether AI is actually helping, and what will we measure to find out?*

Principles for Responsible Use

People in your organization are already using AI. If responsible use is not discussed openly with clear leadership, the organization risks harming its reputation through client-facing errors or the inadvertent sharing of proprietary material with companies that use the data to train their models.

Following are guideposts for discussion across economic development networks:

- **Start with quality inputs.** Direct tools to clean and validate data. Garbage in produces garbage out.
- **Verify sources.** Treat every data claim and citation as a possible fabrication until checked.
- **Verify outputs.** Give the closest scrutiny to timely or subjective claims that cannot be traced to a citable source.
- **Keep a person in the loop.** AI works best when the person directing it already understands the question and can judge the answer. This understanding means that early-career staff who turn to AI before learning the fundamentals cannot judge whether an output is sound. Building the underlying skill comes first, and AI supports the work once that judgment is in place.
- **Protect confidential data.** Know the terms of the tools in use. Never enter protected information into a service that may retain or reuse it.
- **Double down on human relationships.** Local knowledge and trusted relationships cannot be automated.
- **Consider disclosure norms.** Decide when and how to disclose AI-assisted work and apply the practice consistently.

- **Stay flexible and informed.** The tools change constantly and so should the guidance.

The principles underneath all of these are simple. AI assists the practitioner. It does not substitute for the practitioner's judgment.

Current State of Practice

It is important to note that AI adoption in the broader marketplace is widespread but shallow. As of spring 2026, about one in five U.S. businesses reported using AI in at least one business function. Among businesses that have adopted, most use AI in three or fewer functions, which signals early-stage deployment rather than full integration (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026).

The firm-size gap matters for economic developers. Larger firms adopt faster because they have dedicated staff, budget for evaluation, and room to absorb a learning curve. Adoption within an organization does not follow a simple generational line. Early-career staff are sometimes the most cautious, having been taught that AI use is a form of cheating, while senior leaders often drive adoption. Guidance must reach both. While the gap is already smaller than the early broadband divide was, part of the recent narrowing reflects a dip in large-firm use (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2025). That history is instructive. It suggests the diffusion of AI, like broadband before it, will reward people, enterprises, and regions that move deliberately to close the gap for those with a limited ability to experiment.

Inside EDOs, practice is still forming. It is unlikely that most have set formal guidance, even as their staff investigate various tools. Practitioner networks have begun convening to surface real use cases and move toward shared standards (LMI Institute, 2025). The field has an opening to establish good practice early, before unmanaged use sets the norm.

Becoming a Credible AI Practitioner

Before an organization can credibly help its region adopt AI, it has to be believed. Credibility with clients comes from a set of visible habits that show the businesses an organization serves, along with its funders and partners, that it uses AI with care. These habits put the principles above into practice.

Five markers separate a credible practitioner from an enthusiastic one, and each rests on principles already named.

- 1) **It governs its own use.** A credible organization has decided, in writing, how it uses AI and where it will not. A short internal policy sorts data by sensitivity, keeps protected and contractual information out of open tools, and requires a person to review any AI output before it leaves the building. This is where “protect confidential data” and “keep a person in the loop” become standing rules

rather than good intentions. For example, a human resources staffer loads three years of employer-provided wage records into a free chatbot to spot trends, and the tool retains the data under terms no one read. A one-page policy that names approved tools and flags employer records as protected helps to stop that upload before it happens.

2) It assigns clear ownership.

A policy changes little without someone accountable for it. A credible organization names who decides which tools are approved, gives staff a simple way to request a new one, and sets a regular point to revisit the guidance as the tools change. The structure is light, but it turns a one-time document into a living practice. For example, a mid-sized EDO asks a deputy director to own AI decisions and adds a five-minute request step to its monthly staff meeting, so a new tool gets a quick review instead of quietly entering through a personal account.

3) It shows its work.

Credibility rests on the ability to explain how a result was reached. A credible practitioner applies **“verify sources”** and **“verify outputs”** to every figure and citation an AI tool produces, traces claims to primary sources, and follows **“consider disclosure norms”** so readers know when AI assisted. For example, an analyst uses an AI tool to generate a list of the region’s fastest-growing occupations, and it returns a clean table with a projected growth rate that no BLS or state series supports. Checking each number against the primary source catches the invented figure before it reaches a board packet or company request for information response.

4) It builds judgment alongside access.

Access to a tool is easy to buy. The harder investment is in people who can direct AI and judge what it returns, which is what **“keep a person in the loop”** demands. A credible organization trains staff on the tasks the work repeats and protects the learning order for newer analysts. For example, a new analyst accepts an AI-drafted cluster analysis that looks polished but misreads the region’s supply chain because they have not yet done the analysis by hand. Pairing them with a senior colleague builds the judgment to catch it.

5) It leads by practice.

The most persuasive credential is a track record. An organization that has used AI on real work, kept what worked, and stayed current as the tools changed can speak from experience, which is **“stay flexible and informed”** carried into daily habit. For example, an EDO that has run its own labor market profiles with AI for a year can tell a member chamber exactly which steps to trust and which to check, rather than passing along a vendor’s brochure.

The next step

These markers point to a single, practical first move in your EDO. Run a small pilot on real work. Choose one or two tasks the organization repeats often, such as drafting a labor market profile, screening an incentive request, or summarizing a program's outcomes. Complete them with AI under supervision over a few weeks.

Keep the pilot deliberately small and well documented. Pair a staff member who knows the task with the tool, hold every output to the verification standard the organization expects of its published work, and write down what the tool did well, where it failed, how long each step took, and how the result compared with the same task done the usual way. A few simple measures, such as time saved, error rate, and whether the output held up to review, turn impressions into evidence. A pilot of this size needs no new budget and no new hire. It uses work the organization was going to do anyway.

The pilot accomplishes three things at once. It builds real skill in the staff who run it. It produces the organization's own evidence of where AI helps and where it does not, which is far more convincing than a vendor's claim. And it surfaces the practical questions, about data, review, and disclosure, that a short internal policy should then answer. From that grounded starting point, an economic development organization is ready to turn outward and help its region compete.

Positioning Your Organization as AI Savvy

EDOs hold a position of trust that no single firm or agency can fill. They sit between funders and policy on one side and the employers who drive the region's economy on the other. They are trusted to convene across those lines. That position is exactly what regional AI adoption now requires. The organization that readies itself and then turns outward can lift the competitiveness of an entire region.

The credibility built through that practice is what makes the next move possible. An EDO that uses AI well can speak with expertise to the businesses and partners in its region with authority, and that authority is the foundation for the larger work.

The larger prize lies outward. A region grows more competitive when its firms, workers, and institutions adopt AI faster and more wisely than the pace elsewhere, and adoption at that scale depends on the organizations that connect them. Three regional actions follow from this.

Reach the firms most at risk of falling behind. AI adoption climbs steeply with firm size, so the region's small and midsize employers are the ones most likely to be left out. They rarely have the capacity to evaluate these tools alone. The economic development organization can connect them to assessment, training, and technical assistance, and can turn a widening gap into a shared regional gain.

Build the region's AI-ready talent. Employers are already reshaping jobs around AI. Working through its education and workforce partners, the economic development organization can help the local talent pipeline supply the skills those jobs now demand, so the region's workers move with the shift rather than behind it.

Convene the coalition and anchor it. Federal strategy assumes employer-led, cross-sector partnerships and funds a coordinating role in every state and territory. The economic development organization that connects education, workforce, industry, and government becomes the neutral hub the region organizes around, and it guards the quality of the shared data and evidence that keep the coalition honest.

These actions build on one another. A region that adopts AI through a trusted EDO partner moves faster, wastes less, and keeps the public confidence that lets institutions act together. AI reaches its potential when human judgment guides it, and that judgment is the lasting strength of economic development. The organizations that act now will help their regions compete and hold the trust on which strong regional economies are built. That work is already underway across the field. This paper offers a starting point for how AI can be deployed in support of economic development, and CREC is glad to be part of it.

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