The AI nobody mentions.

Why more than a third of AI users have hidden it at work, why managers hide it most, and the exact words that make it safe to say out loud. For HR people, people managers and team leads.

PART 1 · WHAT IS GOING ON

1. Your managers hide it most
2. Many people do not know the rules
3. Bans go with more risky use, not less
4. The penalty is real, but it depends on the task
5. Being found out costs more than saying it
6. The first reaction is read in seconds

PART 2 · USE IT TOMORROW

A. The first 30 seconds: a decoder
B. The three line AI note
C. A 15 minute team meeting
D. The manager mirror check

How to read this: every finding has the number, the honest limit of the study behind it, and one thing to try tomorrow. Part 2 turns the findings into scripts and templates. The scripts are our practical reading of the research; they have not been tested as a whole in a study. Sources are named under each finding.

THE GUIDE IN ONE MINUTE

1. **It is mostly silence, not secrecy.** Many people use AI openly and just do not mention it. Managers are the most likely to have hidden it.
2. **The fear has a basis.** In experiments, people who used AI were judged as lazier, and people who disclosed it were trusted less.
3. **So the fix is a shared routine, not a confession.** Leaders go first, the rule fits in one sentence, and the first reaction is curiosity, not extra work.

Short on time? Read page 5 before your next one to one. Page 6 is your next team meeting.

FINDING 1 · WHO HIDES IT

Your managers hide it most

43.7%
of managers have hidden their AI use from a manager, colleague or client.

37.1%
of executives have done the same.

27.1%
of individual contributors have done the same.

Across all 5,002 AI users in the survey, 35.9% had hidden it at least once. Their most common worry, named by 49.3% of them: being seen as less capable. Next came how the quality of their work would be seen (42.5%) and being judged as lazy (35.5%). Hiding AI use was also the factor that most separated people whose burnout went up with AI from people whose burnout went down.

"I use it out in the open. We just don't talk about it." Financial analyst, Charter interviews

> **Try this:** the report's own advice is to lead from the top: executives share their AI use first, then managers. Start in the leadership meeting with one question: "Where did AI help you this week, and does your team know?"

Honest limit: online survey of full time US desk workers who use AI, fielded 11 to 26 August 2026. One point in time, and the report itself says its results describe associations, not causes. Hiding may come with burnout without causing it.

Charter AI Pulse, Fall 2026, released 21 October 2026.

FINDING 2 · RULES

Many people do not know the rules

56%
of employees in a 47 country study have used AI at work without knowing whether it is allowed.

57%
have used it in non transparent ways, such as not revealing it or presenting AI content as their own.

Only two in five said their organisation has a policy or guidance on generative AI, and almost one in five did not know whether it has one. In the US survey above, 26% of the people who hide their AI use say they are not sure it is even permitted.

> **Try this:** write your AI rule as one sentence a new starter could repeat. For example: "Use the approved tool for drafts and ideas, never put customer or personal data into a public tool, and you own what you send."

Honest limit: self reported online survey, November 2024 to January 2025; the authors note the true numbers may be higher because people tend to under report this.

Gillespie et al., Trust, attitudes and use of AI: A global study 2025, University of Melbourne and KPMG. Charter AI Pulse, Fall 2026.

FINDING 3 · POLICY

Bans go with more risky use, not less

67%

of employees whose organisation bans generative AI reported uploading company information or copyrighted material into public AI tools.

33%

reported the same where the organisation had no such policy.

Where a policy guides AI use, the figure was 56%; where people were unsure, 38%. The report's own reading: outright bans may be ineffective, and having a policy does not guarantee people follow it. It calls for clear guidance and education.

> **Try this:** if you have a ban, ask your team what they use instead. Then turn the "no" into a safe "yes": one approved tool, a short list of what never goes in, and one named person to ask.

Honest limit: a comparison across organisations, not an experiment. Organisations that ban AI may differ in other ways, and only 6% of employees reported a ban, so it is a minority group. The figures are self reported.

Gillespie et al., Trust, attitudes and use of AI: A global study 2025, University of Melbourne and KPMG.

FINDING 4 · JUDGEMENT

The penalty is real, but it depends on the task

In four preregistered experiments with 4,439 people, colleagues who used AI were rated as lazier and less competent than colleagues who got similar help from other sources. People expected this, and said they were less willing to tell their manager or colleagues about their AI use.

Two things changed the picture. When AI clearly fit the task (writing emails rather than handwritten notes), the penalty on how well a candidate seemed to fit the job was entirely offset. And evaluators who used AI weekly or daily themselves did not show a clear penalty on laziness. Managers who rarely used AI leaned towards the candidate who never used it.

> **Try this:** when you review work, ask "Was AI a good fit for this task?" before you ask "Did you use AI?". Judge the output and the fit, not the tool.

Honest limit: online experiments with imagined colleagues and candidates, not real teams; the context is changing fast.

Reif, Larrick & Soll, Evidence of a social evaluation penalty for using AI, PNAS, May 2025.

FINDING 5 · TRUST

Being found out costs more than saying it

13
experiments with more than 5,000 participants: people who disclosed their AI use were trusted less than people who did not.

Lower still
when someone else exposed the AI use instead of the person saying it themselves.

Changing the wording of the disclosure did not remove the drop, and neither did making disclosure mandatory. A positive attitude to technology softened it but did not erase it. So hiding is not safe, and a one off confession is not free either. The authors suggest that a culture where AI use is seen as normal and legitimate could soften the penalty; that is their suggestion, not something they tested.

> **Try this:** do not leave disclosure to the one brave person on the team. Make it a routine everyone follows, starting with the most senior person in the room (see the three line AI note, page 5).

Honest limit: experiments with students, professionals and online participants rating described people, not long term working relationships.

Schilke & Reimann, The transparency dilemma: How AI disclosure erodes trust, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, vol. 188, 2025.

FINDING 6 · REACTION

The first reaction is read in seconds

4 in 5
daily AI users think sharing their AI techniques would help their team.

Nearly 1 in 3
have held back AI workflows or techniques from coworkers or employers.

About 4×
as likely to hold back: people in the bottom quarter on trust in their organisation, compared with the top.

According to the university's report on the study, employees could tell within the first thirty seconds whether their supervisor was supportive. Brouwers describes the questions in their heads: "Am I punished for this? Will I be given more work?" Our reading: if the answer feels like yes, the next idea is likely to stay private.

> **Try this:** never answer a shared AI workflow with extra work in the same conversation. Use the decoder on page 5.

Honest limit: survey of 604 US employees who use AI at least daily, reported in a university news article; no peer reviewed paper is named yet.

Anicich & Brouwers, USC Marshall School of Business news, 28 August 2026; Harvard Business Review, 10 June 2026.

TOOL A · THE DECODER · FINDINGS 1, 4 AND 6

The first 30 seconds: what they may hear

Someone tells you they used AI on a piece of work. According to the USC report, employees could tell within the first thirty seconds whether their supervisor was supportive. Each row starts from a fear named in the research. **The sentences in all three columns are our own wording and have not been tested in a study.**

YOU SAY	WHAT THEY MAY HEAR	SAY INSTEAD
"So the AI did it?"	"You are less capable than I thought." 49.3% of people who hide AI use worry about being seen as less capable (Charter).	"Thanks for telling me. Show me how you did it. Which part was your judgement?"
"I will have to check all of this again then."	"Your work is worth less now." 42.5% worry how the quality of their work would be seen (Charter).	"Same check as any other work: what did you verify yourself?"
"Did you write any of this yourself?"	"You cut corners." 35.5% worry about being judged as lazy (Charter); AI users were rated lazier in the experiments by Reif et al.	"Was AI a good fit for this task?"
"Is that even allowed here?"	"You broke a rule nobody told you." 26% of people who hide it are not sure AI is permitted (Charter).	"Here is our one sentence rule. Did this fit it?"
"Great, then you can take on the next project too."	"Sharing gets you more work." "Will I be given more work?" (USC study).	"What would you like to do with the time it saved?"
"Perfect, you can present AI to the whole company."	"You are now the AI spokesperson." A role employees feared, in the USC study.	"Can we credit you if others use your method?"

Fears and percentages: Charter AI Pulse, Fall 2026 (among people who have hidden AI use); Anicich & Brouwers, USC Marshall, 2026; Reif, Larrick & Soll, PNAS, 2025.

TOOL B · FINDINGS 4 AND 5

The three line AI note

Add it to any report, deck or analysis where AI did real work. Everyone uses it, managers first, so it becomes routine, not a confession.

AI helped with: e.g. the first draft of section 2 and a summary of 40 survey comments

Why it fit: e.g. repetitive summarising, no personal data involved

I checked and own: e.g. every number against the source; the conclusions are mine

Why these lines: in one experiment the penalty was offset when AI clearly fit the task, so line 2 makes the fit visible. Line 3 keeps accountability with the person. Wording alone did not remove the trust drop in Schilke & Reimann's studies, so the note only works as a shared routine.

TOOL C · FINDINGS 1, 2 AND 6

A 15 minute team meeting

Min 0 to 3	**The manager goes first.** Read this as written: "This week I used AI for [task], and it got [one thing] wrong. I want us to talk about this openly. Nobody gets extra work for sharing a method."
Min 3 to 6	**Read the one sentence rule** (finding 2). Ask: "What is still unclear?" Write the answers down; do not argue them.
Min 6 to 12	**Round the table.** Each person names one task where AI helps them and one task where they would not use it. No comments on either.
Min 12 to 15	**Agree two things:** how shared methods get credit, and what happens to time AI saves. Book the next one.

From the Charter interviews: a manager at a healthcare technology company blocks two hours a week with her team of three to talk through how each of them uses AI.

TOOL D · FINDING 1

The manager mirror check

In the Charter survey, 61.6% of managers said they share what they are learning about AI; 31.8% of workers said their manager does. For specific guidance it was 54.0% against 24.6%. The report's advice: answer yourself first, then compare with your team. Tick each line for yourself, then send the four lines to your team as an anonymous yes or no poll (our suggestion) and write down how many say yes. Every gap is a next step.

THE MANAGER...	YOU: YES?	TEAM: YES
shares what they are learning about AI.	☐	_____
gives specific guidance on when and how to use AI.	☐	_____
uses AI where the team can see it.	☐	_____
makes it feel safe to say "AI helped with this".	☐	_____

Statements 1 to 3 mirror behaviours measured in the Charter AI Pulse (its full ten question list is in the report's appendix); statement 4 is ours.

NEXT STEP

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