

AI IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT: WHAT JOB SEEKERS NEED TO KNOW



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INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence is transforming the global development job market on many fronts.

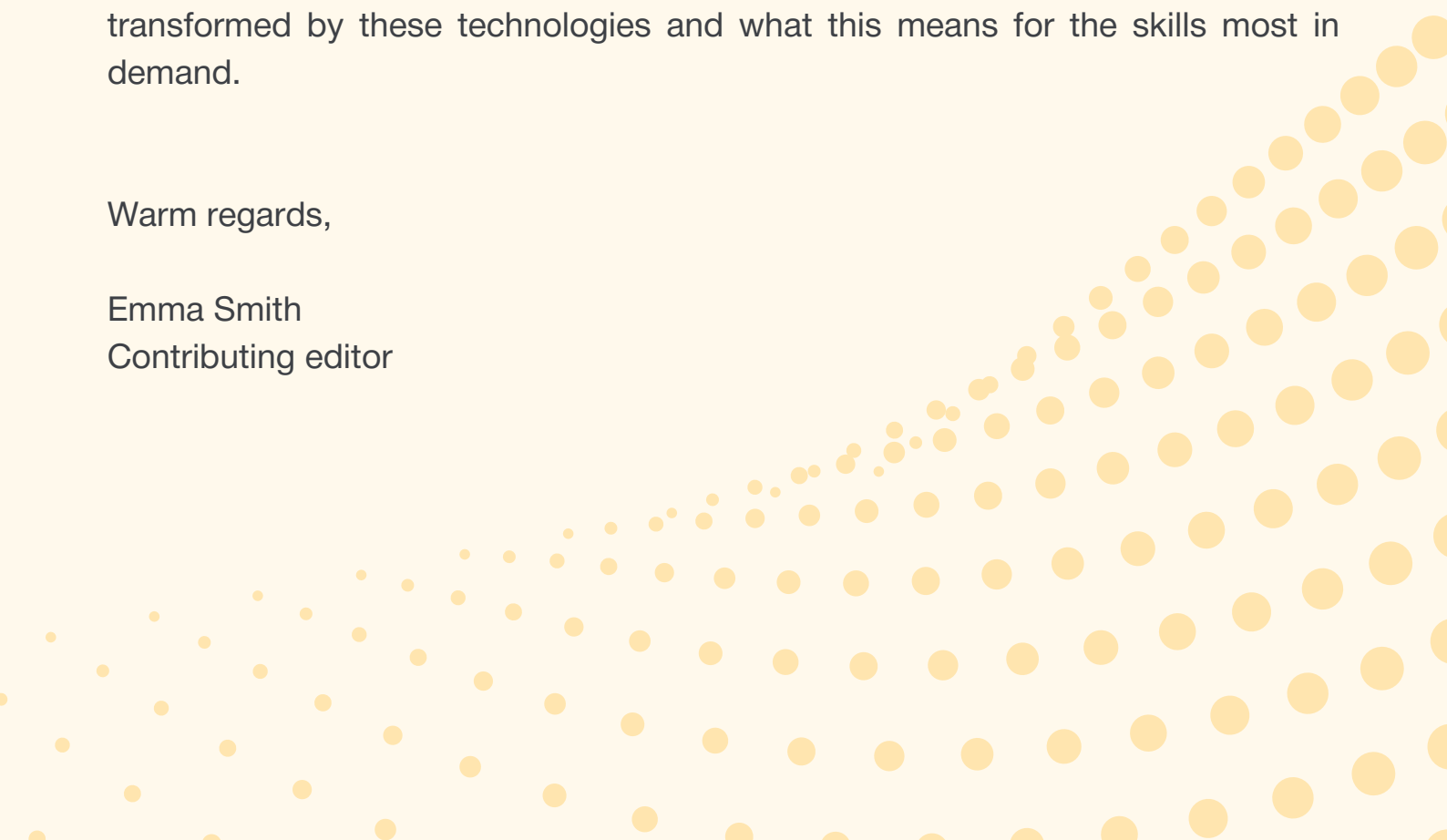
AI adoption across the sector is accelerating as organizations look to do more with limited resources. However, experts Devex spoke to agree that while AI can automate certain tasks, it is not replacing the people who perform them. Instead, AI skills are increasingly becoming an expectation in global development hiring — even when they are not part of the job description — and giving candidates adept with such tools an edge.

Meanwhile, AI is also changing how employers screen applicants, as well as how job seekers support and refine their applications.

In this report, we share insights from recruitment and technical experts across the sector to explore how global development job seekers can effectively use AI throughout their job search. We also look at which roles have already been transformed by these technologies and what this means for the skills most in demand.

Warm regards,

Emma Smith
Contributing editor



WHAT HIRING MANAGERS WANT CANDIDATES TO KNOW ABOUT AI

Global development job seekers are increasingly turning to artificial intelligence to support their job applications, with more tools promising to save them time and increase their chances of success. Recruiters acknowledged these tools can help the job seeker in some aspects of the application, but they cautioned against overrelying on these technologies.

As Luan Prinsloo, global talent acquisition manager at World Vision, put it: When used efficiently, there are advantages to using these tools. But amid a competitive job market, job seekers need to do more to stand out – and when they rely too much on AI in crafting their CV or cover letter, recruiters can end up receiving several almost identical applications, she explained. Similarly, Michael Emery, director of human resources at the International Organization for Migration, said that one of the biggest mistakes he's seeing right now is people entirely relying on AI to produce their cover letter and CV, making it easy for recruiters to spot if they've been lazy in crafting their application.

Dr. Alok I. Ranjan, a global development career coach, suggested that AI can't replicate an individual's self-awareness or clarity of their impact and values – the very traits that can help a candidate stand out in a noisy market. “The strongest professionals I’ve coached use AI to refine their message, not replace it. Their résumés sound like humans who understand technology, not like machines trying to sound human,” he said.

Employers are also using AI, including programs such as ChatGPT, Lindy, and HireVue to write job descriptions, screen résumés, source candidates, create assessments, and conduct interviews. World Vision, like many organizations, uses an applicant tracking system in its screening process, explained Prinsloo, but the process still involves a human element. This, she added, is helpful for candidates who take a “hybrid approach” to using AI in their application.

According to Caitlin van der Merwe, a talent and diversity consultant who has supported health tech organizations with recruitment, many candidates wrongly assume all hiring is done by AI and attempt to “trick” the system. “But when they do eventually get to human contact, it's going to come out and it's not going to reflect well on them,” she said.

She doesn't believe AI should fundamentally change how candidates apply for a role. Ultimately, an application should still be reaching a human, she said, meaning that the same values apply.

WHEN — AND WHEN NOT — TO USE AI IN YOUR JOB SEARCH

As Prinsloo and others Devex spoke to noted, AI tools can be of great assistance to job seekers in spell-checking and proofreading their application materials. But, Prinsloo cautioned that candidates should still double-check all parts of their application or ask a friend to do a final read-through.

Here's where AI can best help job seekers, according to experts, and what they should avoid.

Identifying key skills

Several AI tools can provide analysis of a job posting and help a job seeker identify the key skills and requirements. A lot of development organizations' applicant tracking systems are built on Boolean search algorithms, which are keyword-based, explained Prinsloo, and AI tools can pinpoint the keywords most important to a role and help highlight these in a CV.

However, she stressed that candidates should still tailor each point with their own personal style and use specific and quantifiable examples of their achievements. "Instead of using the generic phrase 'results-driven individual,' rather say, 'I increased profitability on this project by 20%' or 'I led this particular change management initiative in record time.'"

Where candidates are overrelying on AI, recruiters often see overuse of generic phrases, such as “results-driven,” “dynamic professional,” “team player,” or “go-getter.” AI tools are trying to optimize for application tracking systems by using a lot of buzzwords, explained Prinsloo, and, as a result, a CV can read like a checklist of keywords.

Formulating ideas

Overcoming writer's block is another area where AI can assist by providing initial ideas, framing, or samples for cover letters. But candidates should still do the majority of the writing, Prinsloo said. While World Vision doesn't often ask for cover letters, if an employer requests this, then there is a reason — they are likely looking to assess a candidate's writing style or communication abilities, she suggested.

Cover letters that are written entirely by an AI tool also tend not to perform well as they lack insights into an individual's unique motivations for the role and interests in the organization's mission, or can end up closely resembling the work of another candidate.

When hiring for a role for his own company, Jeremy Schifeling, a career development speaker, author, and former recruiter for Teach for America, noticed a lot of cover letters read the same — because they'd all been written by AI. “My immediate instinct was these candidates are not creative, they don't know how to use AI in a very savvy way, and they're probably a little bit lazy; all the things that would make them completely unhireable were now on full display,” he shared.

As Valentina Murace, career coach and HR learning consultant at UNICEF, noted, for many working in the development sector, the reason they're interested in the job often stems from family history, community experience, or a personal story that inspired their career path – and that is something an algorithm can't replace.

Interview preparation

One of the best uses of AI, according to Prinsloo, is for interview preparations. Specific tools are able to develop interview questions related to a role, help candidates practice mock interviews, and provide feedback on their communication skills.

But she reminded job seekers that interviews can often go off script, so they should still be prepared for additional questions with real-life examples that quantify their value and achievements.



HOW AI IS RESHAPING ROLES

Development roles are evolving — some faster than others — with the use of AI. But the biggest change, according to most sources Devex spoke to, is in how the responsibilities of existing roles are being reshaped.

Rebeca Moreno Jiménez, a humanitarian data scientist who supports the integration of AI across different functions, explained that while a few new roles are emerging — including generative AI engineers, prompt engineers, and data scientists with new terms of reference — the biggest change is happening within job descriptions.

Teams working in protection, legal, and human resources are among those she sees more rapidly adopting AI and exploring ways it can support greater speed and efficiency in their work.

Khuloud Odeh, chief information officer at the International Telecommunication Union, agreed that job titles themselves are not changing, but that roles are being “revisited, redesigned, and reenvisioned,” with AI increasing expectations of greater output and faster turnaround time for some roles. Among the functions seeing the fastest change are knowledge management, customer-facing roles, software development, and research and analysis, she said. Roles involving judgment, high levels of accountability, or high-stakes decision-making are moving more cautiously on AI adoption.

Strategy development is an area that's already seen significant shifts. According to Ali Al Mokdad, a senior strategic leader who advises organizations on AI strategy and implementation, AI tools are already taking on a large share of context analysis, scenario planning, and risk management, he said. Meanwhile, in portfolio management roles, the integration of dashboards, such as Microsoft's Power BI and generative AI tools that support the drafting of reports and proposals, has been a game changer.

Here are seven other global development roles that are being rapidly transformed by AI:

1. Business development and proposal writing

Proposal writers are already utilizing generative AI tools, including the Grant Assistant platform, to draft early bids, draw on previous submissions, and synthesize technical language.

According to Jack Jarrett, an international development HR adviser, NGOs and development consultancies are leveraging generative AI for grant writing and business development proposals. He noted its ability to rephrase proposal sections to align with different donors, for example, the tone of a proposal might be different for a humanitarian group than for a private foundation.



2. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning roles have been at the forefront of AI adoption in the development space.

“With AI tools now able to automate survey analysis, detect anomalies, and even write impact reports, the work becomes less about mechanics and more about uncovering and translating the story the data is telling,” explained Anwulika Ngozi Okonjo, a digital innovation strategist.

3. Program and project management

Many in the sector have started to demonstrate a more adaptive, data-driven approach to program and project management. Predictive analytics and other AI-based tools are making it possible to anticipate project outcomes and identify risks, including conflict outbreaks, climate disruptions, and operational bottlenecks.

But Jarrett said successful integration with project and program work will still depend heavily on human quality assessment. “AI won’t replace the human elements that are crucial to successful development programs, so program staff will continue to play a vital role in searching AI-generated insights, tailoring intervention to social context, and navigating complex stakeholder dynamics.”

4. Policy analysis

Decision-makers are leveraging AI-enabled, data-driven support systems to simulate policy impacts, forecast risks, and inform resource allocation.

Okonjo believes AI will continue to significantly reshape roles in policy design. “Policy advisers will increasingly use AI to model outcomes, or even generate synthetic data to guide decisions where real-world data is scarce,” she said, referring to the ability to artificially create data that mimics the characteristics of real-world datasets. This synthetic data can then be used in training AI systems to predict hypothetical outcomes.

5. Internal communications

For those managing institutional knowledge and internal communications, AI is being used to summarize team meetings, organize internal documentation, tag content, and even suggest strategy language, said Joel Levesque, a veteran development consultant and author of the Job Search with AI newsletter on Substack. “As long as people can navigate the privacy factors, it's a powerful tool,” he added.

This is especially relevant for junior professionals or administrative staff, who are more likely to be responsible for internal knowledge workflows, because it can automate tasks such as data entry, research, and first-draft writing. “I think it’s going to leave space for junior staff to contribute more strategically and analytically,” Jarrett said.

6. Research

AI tools allow researchers to scan hundreds of academic papers, synthesize findings, and even suggest research questions based on gaps in the literature. “The focus is shifting from collecting data to vetting it, structuring it, and knowing how to question it and use it,” Levesque said. “If you know how to use AI well, you can save hours — if not days — in the research process.”

But, given that generative AI tools can sometimes confidently produce inaccurate results, he stressed that “the quality of research is directly influenced by the level of understanding of AI tools.”

7. Media and communications

Generative AI tools are helping communications professionals craft messaging strategies, frame advocacy narratives, and shape an organization’s public voice. These tools can be especially useful in assisting multilingual communication, an area that is often underresourced, according to Jarrett.

“Professionals are now going to need to spend more time editing, fact-checking, and rewording outputs, rather than perhaps translating from scratch,” Jarrett said. “Rather than replacing translators or communication professionals, I think these tools are reshaping their role, from being language converters to becoming quality controllers.”

BEYOND TECHNICAL SKILLS, WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS SEEKING?

AI literacy

This is now a baseline rather than a specialization, according to Jiménez and other experts. Basic AI skills, she explained, include knowing how to prompt human-machine augmented intelligence, or HMAI, systems — such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini — to produce different types of documents, how to build and interpret dashboards, and even how to automate certain tasks on those platforms.

The ability to spot hallucinations or identify when AI has gone wrong is another fundamental skill, relying on domain-specific expertise to recognize, for example, when sources are incorrect. “Anyone can get an answer from a chatbot, but not everyone can tell me what’s wrong,” Jiménez said.

An adaptive mindset

Regardless of whether someone works in IT or HR, Odeh said the professionals who will thrive are those who are adaptive and approach changes with curiosity rather than anxiety. This can be as simple as experimenting with new large language model tools.

It's clear that you don't need to be a prompt engineer or have coding skills to meaningfully engage with AI in development and humanitarian work, said Ka Man Parkinson, communications and marketing lead at the Humanitarian Leadership Academy. What matters, she added, are project management and leadership skills, along with a willingness to embrace agile ways of working.

Ethical judgement

Development professionals do need to be aware of data privacy, bias, and transparency concerns in their use of AI, as well as the environmental and digital access considerations. "We need to be vigilant and continue to raise these issues and recognize, as we're using AI, that it's a tool, it's a complement, [and] it can help us. But there are limitations," Édes said.

Experts outlined several free courses available to help those looking to better understand AI risk factors, including the Ethics of AI, created by the University of Helsinki. There are also courses geared toward those in the development and nonprofit space, including Apolitical's course on data privacy for public servants.

Human skills

AI may be transforming how the development sector operates, but it isn't replacing the human values that drive it. As Murace put it, empathy, collaboration, and social impact remain essential. The future of work, she said, will belong to those who can combine technological fluency with emotional intelligence and ethical leadership.

According to Odeh, what she prefers to call “human skills” are becoming more important and increasingly in demand. With AI producing vast amounts of information and models constantly learning, there is a growing need for human expertise to validate and improve these outputs. “We’re going to see [an] increase in the demand for experts who can really, with confidence, tell you that this is correct or not,” she said.

Other important human skills include critical thinking, which enables one to question whether AI output is accurate, complete, and contextually appropriate; intellectual humility, or recognizing that having access to an AI tool does not mean you know more than a specialist who has developed expertise through years of education and practice; and ethical reasoning — understanding that AI can replicate biases and misrepresent communities, particularly because many models are primarily trained in the global north.

HOW GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT JOB SEEKERS CAN DEVELOP AI SKILLS

The good news is that there are many free or inexpensive courses and tutorials available to help development professionals learn on their own.

The experts recommended several online platforms, such as Coursera, HPass, Credly, and edX, which offer courses in AI tools and, in some cases, badges in different skills, as well DeepLearning.AI's "AI for Everyone" and Google's introduction to generative AI.

Parkinson suggested that professionals share those qualifications on their LinkedIn along with insights on what they have learned. This signals to employers that you are engaged and thinking about how to bring these tools to your work.

There are also AI courses and webinars specific to leadership, data management, and international affairs, Mokdad noted. But his top recommendation is that job seekers use AI tools and prompt them to search the internet and provide key recommendations based on what's available online.



Jiménez emphasized the value of learning through collaborations with data science or information technology teams, or with those working in the same areas of expertise. She added that it's also important to stay informed of trends in your specific sector and how AI is affecting it.

And, if you're starting from scratch, Jarrett suggested focusing on getting to know what widely used AI tools are capable of and how some of this might be specifically applied to your role. “[Look] at platforms that address immediate needs, so practical needs, rather than diving into highly technical tools.”

HOW TO SHOWCASE AI SKILLS IN YOUR APPLICATION

Jiménez suggested that job seekers can look at the tools widely used in their sector or area of expertise and list role-relevant programs or AI tools on their CV. Communications officers, for example, could highlight Canva AI and the generative AI tools they use for proofreading or editing.

Other relevant skills for development professionals to note on their application documents could include basic prompting, AI-enabled project management tools, and, for data-focused roles, programming proficiency.



As professionals become increasingly comfortable with tools such as ChatGPT, it will take more for job seekers to stand out, according to Odeh. To do this, they should provide examples that demonstrate how they can leverage these tools to create value in the context of the job they are applying for.

She gave the example of someone working as part of a small team to deliver a comprehensive report, where they managed the use of AI tools to draft and produce it within a short timeframe and at a fraction of what it previously cost to create such a document. The most important thing isn't the tool you used, she explained, especially since by the time someone reviews your résumé, new tools may already have emerged and shifted perspectives. Instead, focus on the value you can bring to a role and organization through your use of these tools.

In doing so, she encouraged candidates to articulate how they use these tools and the value they create in a genuine way. This is another way to stand out from the AI-generated language now prevalent in CVs and applications.

“The more you bring the human element into it, I would say the better ... we're now eager to see the real human side of somebody's CV, so don't be shy about adding your own personal flair.”