# Future of Work in the Gastronomy Sector: Challenges of Adopting Artificial Intelligence in a Service Industry

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The digital transformation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration promise to restructure complex service operations from back-stage management to front-stage customer interactions. However, while theoretical benefits of automation and augmentation are recognized, practical implementation in gastronomy frequently stalls, overlooking specific socio-technical realities of physical environments. To address this gap, we conducted a qualitative, exploratory study based on expert interviews (N=6) using a dyadic sample of AI providers and gastronomy operators. Findings indicate that AI integration is rarely hindered by algorithmic flaws but collides with a multi-layered socio-technical integration gap: (1) unstandardized analog processes preventing deterministic data extraction, (2) infrastructural debt from legacy IT, and (3) monopolistic vendor politics enforcing lock-ins and stifling scalability. This paper contributes to the Future of Work discourse by demonstrating that algorithms cannot optimize fragmented physical workflows, highlighting process standardization, workflow virtualization, and open data standards as critical prerequisites.

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## 1 Introduction

Rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) are fundamentally transforming the world of work by automating routine tasks, improving productivity, and shifting skill requirements (Mossavar-Rahmani & Zohuri, 2024). While AI adoption accelerates globally, the traditional service industry and particularly the gastronomy and hospitality sectors faces unique hurdles. Historically slow to adopt technological innovations (Gupta & Godiyal, 2025), these sectors operate through complex, intertwined front-stage and back-stage processes. Today, severe labor shortages and growing customer demand exert immense pressure on this industry to urgently integrate AI and evaluate robotic process innovations for both task automation and workforce augmentation (Ferdous et al., 2023; Blöcher & Alt, 2021).

However, the existing "Future of Work" literature often fails to adequately address the specific dynamics of the service sector, particularly the acute labor shortages, escalating human resource costs, and the rapid push towards self-service innovations (Dăniloaia & Turturean, 2024; Lorenz et al., 2023; Pennathur et al., 2024). Consequently, there is a distinct lack of empirical understanding regarding the practical barriers to AI implementation at the operational base. While broader studies indicate that digital initiatives rarely fail due to technological immaturity but rather structural obstacles (Ivchyk, 2024; Kar & Kushwaha, 2023; Rjab et al., 2023), the specific manifestations of these barriers in gastronomy where modern algorithms collide with fragmented physical workflows and monopolistic legacy IT remain underexplored.

To address this gap, this study poses the following research question: What socio-technical integration gaps emerge as primary barriers during the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in the service industry?

To answer this question, we conducted an exploratory, qualitative study based on expert interviews (N=6) using a dyadic sample of leading AI founders and CEOs (supply-side) alongside senior corporate and institutional gastronomy operators (demand-side)[1]. Our findings reveal that successful AI adoption is primarily hindered not by algorithmic flaws or employee resistance, but by a multi-layered

[1] The sample intentionally comprises C-level executives, founders, and senior directors who are directly responsible for AI scaling and strategic IT procurement, thereby ensuring profound domain expertise.

socio-technical gap. Integration frequently stalls at unstandardized analog processes, rigid legacy IT systems, and, critically, deliberate *vendor lock-in* strategies by established software monopolies. These barriers disrupt both autonomous task automation and workforce augmentation, forcing manual workarounds and paralyzing the realization of "New Work" concepts.

By uncovering these structural bottlenecks, this paper contributes to the Future of Work discourse by illustrating that standardizing and virtualizing physical workflows and breaking historical software monopolies are prerequisites for AI integration. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 details the theoretical background, followed by the qualitative methodology (Section 3) and the empirical findings (Section 4). Section 5 discusses the socio-technical implications, before Section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2 Theoretical Background

### 2.1 AI in Complex Service Systems: Front-Stage and Back-Stage Operations

The gastronomy and broader hospitality sectors are fundamentally structured as complex service systems. Unlike purely digital or manufacturing environments, value creation in these sectors relies on a highly interdependent network of physical workflows, human coordination, and informational exchanges. Service management literature traditionally divides these operations into two distinct but deeply interconnected spheres: "front-stage" processes directly visible to the customer (e.g., ordering, checkout) and hidden "back-stage" processes (e.g., kitchen production, inventory management) (Glushko & Tabas, 2009).

While the restaurant industry has recently begun navigating a broader digital transformation across both of these operational layers to drive efficiency (Alt, 2021), historically, these physical workflows have been characterized by a low degree of digitalization and highly heterogeneous, unstandardized manual routines. However, facing acute labor shortages and efficiency pressures, the industry is currently attempting to integrate Artificial Intelligence (AI) to optimize these operations. While the theoretical deployment of AI promises significant benefits, integrating highly deterministic, data-centric technologies into a historically unstandardized,

physical environment introduces immense socio-technical complexity. AI algorithms require clean, standardized data points to function; thus, the underlying analog processes must be strictly standardized before any digital optimization can occur.

## 2.2 Restructuring Service Work: Task Automation and Augmentation

The integration of AI into these complex systems is intended to profoundly restructure the nature of service work. Within this context, the literature conceptualizes the impact of AI through two primary mechanisms: task automation and task augmentation (Agrawal et al., 2023; Lei & Kim, 2024).

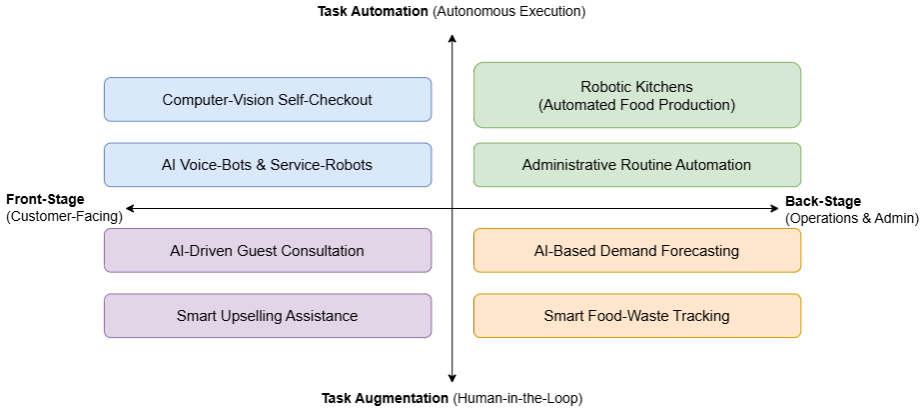


**Figure 1: An AI Restructuring Matrix in Complex Service Systems. Categorizing exemplary AI use cases based on their operational domain (front-stage vs. back-stage) and their impact on human labor (augmentation vs. automation)**

Source: Own

Task automation refers to the deployment of AI and robotics to autonomously execute specific, routine processes, effectively substituting human labor for those tasks. This is increasingly recognized as a crucial process innovation in high-contact service environments (Blöcher & Alt, 2021). Examples include autonomous computer-vision checkout systems and robotic kitchen production. Conversely, task augmentation deliberately keeps the human worker "in the loop." AI systems, such as demand forecasting algorithms, are utilized to support and enhance human decision-making in the back-stage, elevating the employee's capabilities without

replacing them. The ultimate goal of this restructured "New Work" environment in gastronomy is to free the workforce from repetitive administrative burdens, allowing them to focus on high-value, specialized tasks (Lavoie-Gagne et al., 2025). However, achieving this relies heavily on seamless data flows and interoperability across the entire service system.

To systematically categorize how AI reshapes these distinct operational domains, Figure 1 synthesizes the theoretical dimensions of service work. By crossing the operational domain (front-stage vs. back-stage) with the systemic impact on human labor (task automation vs. task augmentation), exemplary AI use cases emerge within the gastronomy sector.

### 2.3 Socio-Technical Integration Barriers: Legacy IT and Politics

To understand why the restructuring of service work frequently stalls in practice, gastronomy operations must be viewed through the lens of Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory. A core principle is "joint optimization": implementing AI will only yield benefits if the structural and political foundation is adapted simultaneously (Sony & Naik, 2020). When modern AI collides with rigid or outdated structures, "socio-technical integration gaps" emerge.

Current literature identifies infrastructural debt commonly referred to as legacy IT as a primary technical barrier (Arora, 2025). Many traditional gastronomy businesses rely on fragmented, proprietary legacy systems (e.g., old Point-of-Sale or Enterprise Resource Planning systems) that lack the open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) required for modern AI integration, creating massive data silos.

Crucially, recent critical perspectives expand on this by highlighting that these technological silos are often maintained by *vendor politics* and *institutional macro-politics* (Archer et al., 2025; Thylstrup et al., 2024). Rather than mere technical inability, established legacy system providers frequently utilize their market monopolies to enforce vendor lock-in effects. By deliberately restricting API access or charging exorbitant integration fees, these providers strategically shield their closed ecosystems from innovative third-party AI solutions. Furthermore, in highly regulated sectors such as public catering, this integration gap is exacerbated by macro-political fragmentation, where differing bureaucratic requirements across

municipalities stifle scalable digital rollouts. While these monopolistic and institutional barriers are theoretically acknowledged, empirical evidence exploring how they actively disrupt the restructuring of frontline service work remains scarce.

# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

To explore the socio-technical integration gaps of AI in complex service systems, this study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design. Given the underexplored intersection of modern AI, legacy IT, and physical workflows in gastronomy, an interview-based approach provides the depth required to uncover underlying socio-technical dynamics.

## 3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

Data was gathered through semi-structured expert interviews using purposive sampling to ensure high domain expertise. We utilized a dyadic sample of six (N=6) senior experts from both the supply side (AI founders/CEOs) and the demand side (corporate and institutional leaders) to ensure a holistic perspective. This seniority and dyadic approach provide robust "information power" regarding structural barriers despite the compact sample size. Interviews were conducted in German, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Table 1 summarizes the expert profiles.

**Table 1: Expert Interview Sample Profiles**

| Interview ID | Role | Organization Type | Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| **A** | Founder & CEO | AI Tech Startup | Computer Vision & Autonomous Self-Checkout |
| **B** | Founder & CEO | AI Tech Startup | Machine Learning Demand Forecasting |
| **C** | Founder & CEO | AI Tech Startup | Digital Guest Consultation & Storytelling |
| **D** | Founder & CEO | AI Tech Startup | Automating and digitizing invoice verification |
| **E** | Corporate Gastronomy Expert | Multinational Corporate Catering & Facility Management | AI Scaling in Corporate Catering, Cultural Transformation, Piloting food service innovations |
| **F** | Foundation Expert | Non-Profit Foundation for Food & Nutrition Education | Providing dietary consultation, nutritional education, and Institutional kitchen management |

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Given the exploratory nature and compact sample (N=6), coding was conducted manually. An iterative process combined deductive coding based on our theoretical framework (e.g., task automation, infrastructural debt) with inductive open coding to capture emergent, industry-specific phenomena (e.g., vendor politics, lack of process standardization).

These initial codes were continuously refined and grouped into the four higher-order socio-technical integration gaps conceptualized in Figure 2. To ensure analytical rigor, emerging themes were constantly compared across the dyadic sample contrasting AI providers with gastronomy operators to validate the structural nature of the identified barriers. Finally, representative quotes were translated into English, preserving contextual nuances.

## 4 Findings

The analysis of the expert interviews suggests that the primary hurdles to successfully restructuring service work through AI are rarely algorithmic flaws or a fundamental unwillingness of the service workforce. By analyzing the dyadic perspectives of both AI providers and gastronomy operators, it becomes evident that the implementation of both autonomous systems and augmenting tools consistently stalls at two major socio-technical integration gaps: severe infrastructural debt combined with unstandardized processes, and complex market and institutional politics.

### 4.1 The Precondition of Process Standardization and Infrastructural Debt

Before technical interfaces can even be addressed, the demand-side experts emphasized a severe lack of operational process standardization as the foundational barrier. The integration of AI requires deterministic structures; however, the physical preparation and administration in complex service systems remain highly heterogeneous. As one corporate gastronomy expert highlighted, AI cannot optimize a broken or unstandardized workflow:

> "In many cases, AI startups and solutions do not fail because of a flawed technology or problem-solving approach, but rather because of the rigid, fragmented organizational and IT structures they are confronted with." (Corporate Gastronomy Expert 1)

Without a unified analog process, AI algorithms lack the necessary data points to function effectively:

> "If the underlying operational processes are not strictly standardized, there is simply no point of attack for the AI. This severe lack of process standardization makes it incredibly difficult for AI systems to extract valid data and generate any actual added value." (Corporate Gastronomy Expert 1)

The sheer scale of this operational fragmentation often outpaces technological advancements, rendering "plug-and-play" AI deployments impossible for large operators:

> "The fundamental hurdle is operating 400 canteens with 400 completely different workflows. Ultimately, AI technology will advance much faster than the operational ability of the gastronomy sector to align and standardize its internal processes." (Corporate Gastronomy Expert 1)

### 4.2 Infrastructural Debt and the Cost of Legacy IT

When standardized processes do exist, the next major barrier is the reliance on rigid, historically grown IT infrastructures. Traditional gastronomy operations are built on legacy Point-of-Sale (POS) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems that are fundamentally incompatible with modern, cloud-based AI.

> "Many legacy point-of-sale systems have grown historically and are simply not cloud-native solutions. They are based on architectures that are 20 or 30 years old. Instead of investing in new, open infrastructure, providers continue to just 'milk the cow,' adding superficial web plugins to heavily closed systems." (AI Provider 3)

This infrastructural debt severely disrupts front-stage task automation. AI providers report massive resource drains just trying to establish basic connectivity:

> "It is the very old-school point-of-sale systems that are the real pain. The fundamental pain point of the industry right now is the sheer lack of standardized protocols and interfaces that would allow systems to communicate with each other." (AI Provider 1)

> "I would estimate that we invest over a third of our entire development resources solely into system integration with the existing IT landscape." (AI Provider 1)

For back-stage augmentation, such as AI-driven demand forecasting, missing automated interfaces actively create new administrative burdens. The resulting data delays drastically reduce the algorithm's predictive value:

> "Imagine you are a kitchen manager updating the menu on Monday. Because automated interfaces are missing, our AI only receives the manual data export on Friday. For the entire week, the algorithm operates on outdated information, severely limiting its predictive value." (AI Provider 2)

Consequently, employees are forced into manual workarounds, contradicting the core premise of AI-driven relief:

> "Currently, the kitchen manager has to keep their legacy inventory system open alongside our AI tool. They are forced to work across two different formats and manually transfer the data between them, which prevents any seamless task augmentation." (AI Provider 2)

### 4.3 Vendor Politics, Monopolies, and the Illusion of Open APIs

Beyond the technical challenges, the interviews exposed massive barriers within the political subsystem. Notably, the integration gap is deliberately widened by external vendor politics. AI providers unanimously reported that legacy IT providers maintain closed systems not out of technical inability, but as a strategic mechanism to protect their market share.

> "The biggest absolute showstopper for AI integration are the political blockades imposed by legacy POS providers. The main difficulty is not the technology itself, but rather the deliberate lack of integration-willingness from established vendors protecting their market share." (AI Provider 3)

> "Most legacy systems have interfaces in some form, and the actual technical effort to develop them is completely manageable. Instead, the biggest—the absolute biggest—issue is politics." (AI Provider 1)

This gatekeeping is largely driven by a systemic fear of replacement. As AI startups introduce highly advanced augmentation and automation tools, legacy providers act defensively to secure their ecosystems:

> "A new AI system docks onto an existing system, and the immediate reflex of the established system—and the market—is fear and concern that the new technology will take something away from them. The initial reaction is always: 'Oh, something new is coming, they want to replace us, we have to be careful.'" (AI Provider 1)

Established providers intentionally utilize this monopolistic power to artificially inflate integration costs, effectively pricing innovative AI out of the market:

> "The established legacy system providers know exactly what kind of leverage and structural power they hold over the market. Because there are few alternatives, they use this monopoly to charge exorbitant fees for basic data interfaces, artificially creating massive political and financial barriers for AI integration." (AI Provider 2)

To mask these blockades, legacy providers often rely on deceptive marketing regarding their technical openness:

> "For marketing reasons, every legacy system provider claims to have an 'open API.' But the reality is highly restrictive. You might only be able to retrieve aggregated daily revenue, but you cannot process real-time orders. The lack of open standards is often a deliberate political blockade rather than a technical limitation." (AI Provider 3)

This culminates in the aggressive pushing of "all-in-one" solutions, which creates severe vendor lock-in and prevents gastronomy operators from utilizing specialized AI tools:

> "Large legacy providers often push 'one-solution-fits-all' systems to intentionally create a vendor lock-in effect. They play on the management's fear of digital complexity. However, this political strategy severely harms the gastronomy business, because a single closed system can never seamlessly cover every specific operational need or integrate the best AI tools." (AI Provider 3)

### 4.4 The Cost of Uncertainty and Cultural Resistance

The culmination of rigid infrastructure, monopolistic gatekeeping, and unstandardized processes creates an environment of immense uncertainty. For AI providers, this socio-technical friction is the primary reason for project failure:

> "When we evaluate the deals we lose, the number one 'Reason for Loss' in our CRM is missing integration. The sheer uncertainty—not knowing if an interface will be built, when it will be ready, or what it will cost—is the factor that ultimately destroys projects." (AI Provider 1)

Finally, when gastronomy management attempts to navigate these external blockades, they frequently underestimate the internal, human dimension of the restructuring process. The successful implementation of task automation and augmentation requires a workforce prepared to embrace new workflows:

> "Digital transformation is, at its core, a cultural transformation. Any technological innovation is only as effective as the foundational cultural will within the organization to actually implement it and adapt to it." (Corporate Gastronomy Expert 1)

Ultimately, the collision of modern AI algorithms with fragmented analog workflows, monopolistic vendor politics, and cultural inertia acts as the definitive socio-technical integration gap preventing the Future of Work in the service industry.

# 5 Discussion

## 5.1 Synthesizing the Socio-Technical Integration Gaps

This study examined how legacy IT and organizational politics emerge as socio-technical integration gaps during AI adoption. Our findings confirm that AI restructuring rarely fails due to algorithmic flaws. Rather, it stalls at a multi-layered collision between advanced algorithms and rigid socio-technical structures. This cascading failure is conceptualized in **Figure 2**, illustrating how the theoretical ambition of AI is systematically blocked across four layers.

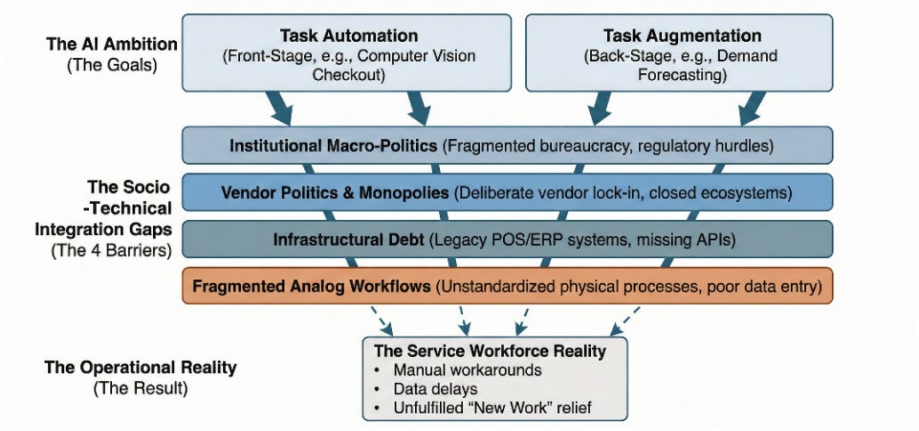


**Figure 2: Multi-Layered Socio-Technical Integration Gap in Complex Service Systems. This conceptual model illustrates how the intended restructuring of service work (automation and augmentation) is systematically disrupted by institutional, political, technical, and operational barriers, resulting in manual workarounds for the workforce**

Source: Own

While current 'Future of Work' literature predominantly focuses on individual AI adoption factors like skill shifts or algorithm aversion (Mossavar-Rahmani & Zohuri, 2024; Dăniloaia & Turturean, 2024), the model in Figure 2 reveals that integration rarely reaches the human-algorithm interface. Viewed through the STS lens of "joint optimization", AI stalls at structural hard-stops that preemptively override individual-level acceptance. Specifically, the restructuring is paralyzed by unstandardized analog workflows and "infrastructural debt" a debt deliberately maintained by monopolistic legacy providers enforcing vendor lock-ins.

Compounded by institutional macro-politics, these systemic barriers fundamentally block the restructuring of service work.

### 5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This paper offers two distinct theoretical contributions. First, it expands Future of Work literature beyond knowledge workers to physical service systems, identifying analog process standardization as a foundational prerequisite for AI integration. As our findings strongly suggest, algorithms struggle to optimize fragmented workflows.

Second, our dyadic approach broadens the perspective on the political dimension of STS theory. While existing literature focuses on internal resistance, like "algorithm aversion," our exploratory findings indicate that external forces, market monopolies (vendor politics), and institutional fragmentation (macro-politics), act as major political barriers that prevent scalable task automation.

### 5.3 Practical Implications

For practitioners, these insights demand a paradigm shift and the adoption of holistic AI integration frameworks to successfully navigate complex service environments. For AI startups and technology providers, the "plug-and-play" illusion has to end. Instead of exhausting resources on costly, customized 1-to-1 workarounds, providers must actively participate in industry-wide alliances to develop vendor-agnostic middleware architectures and open data protocols (comparable to the E-Class standard). For gastronomy management and corporate operators, the mandate is twofold. First, they must prioritize the rigorous standardization or complete virtualization (e.g., shifting on-site ordering to digital pre-order platforms) of their physical, analog processes before deploying AI. Second, management must leverage its purchasing power to break vendor lock-ins. During IT procurement, decision-makers must strictly mandate genuinely open APIs, thereby forcing the market towards interoperability.

# 6 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

## 6.1 Conclusion

The digital transformation of the gastronomy sector promises unprecedented operational efficiency, yet AI's theoretical potential currently collides with the harsh realities of the service industry. This study highlights that successful AI integration is a profound socio-technical challenge, not merely an algorithmic one. Our exploratory study highlights that AI adoption stalls across interconnected layers: unstandardized analog workflows at the foundation , infrastructural debt from legacy IT , and monopolistic vendor politics that actively block innovative tools. To unlock the "Future of Work," the industry must undergo a paradigm shift. Operators must rigorously standardize and virtualize physical processes, while leveraging their collective purchasing power to enforce open, vendor-agnostic data standards. Only by modernizing this socio-technical foundation can AI successfully elevate the nature of service work.

## 6.2 Limitations and Future Research

While providing deep empirical insights, this qualitative study is limited to six highly specialized experts in the DACH region, restricting statistical generalizability. Future research should employ large-scale quantitative surveys among gastronomy operators and IT procurement officers to measure the exact financial and temporal impacts of these integration gaps. Additionally, longitudinal studies could observe how political dynamics between legacy providers and AI startups evolve amid increasing regulatory pressure for interoperable middleware architectures.

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