

BUSINESS & FINANCE



Iraklis Pappas hosts regular staff seminars, workshops and hackathons to drive greater employee adoption of AI at the maker of toothpaste and soap.

Colgate Has an AI Evangelist

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white-collar workers outside of software engineering have been slow to embrace fast-changing AI tools.

OpenAI co-founder Sam Altman, Microsoft Chief Executive Satya Nadella and others have spoken about a yawning gap between AI-model capabilities and individual usage. While frontier startups and tech giants are planning to spend trillions of dollars in coming years to build data centers that can meet the computing needs of AI systems, that spending is largely based on assumptions that millions more users—especially corporations—will pay for AI tools and services.

Coders have expressed awe at the extent to which powerful AI models can replicate

their expertise. But rank-and-file employees across many other industries have been slower converts due to fears of being replaced, a lack of time for training and frustration typical of any population learning new technology.

The potential for disruption across industries has rattled markets in recent weeks, but economists and others are divided in their forecasts about AI's effect on productivity and profits.

Pappas dismisses as "media hype" claims that AI adoption isn't a profit driver. Instead, he steers Colgate employees to an academic study currently under peer review showing AI's positive impact on the bottom line at an online-shopping platform, and he points to internal Colgate survey data showing positive non-monetary effects.

"Every single investment has a business case" at Colgate, Pappas said. Before spending money on software, he is required to estimate the returns.

Pappas began at Colgate as an intern while an undergraduate at Rutgers University in

New Jersey and left for four years to earn a Ph.D. in chemistry from Princeton University. Before becoming the company's head of AI in 2023, he was a data scientist and worked on predictive analytics.

Pappas formed a partnership with one of Colgate's top executives, lawyer Nadine Flynn, to smooth the path for rolling out AI software to employees.

They added "responsible AI principles" to Colgate's code of conduct, making clear the goal wasn't to replace workers with AI but to "augment them," Pappas said. The revision triggered mandatory employee training.

One challenge for executives pushing AI on their teams is that employees fret over being sidelined by the technology.

"Across industries, there either is or should be some level of fear for companies and for

individual employees," said Gretchen Greene, the chief of artificial intelligence at law firm Ropes & Gray. But "if we don't learn to use AI well, those who do will get ahead."

AI has helped Colgate find savings in a number of unexpected places. One was in Greece.

A plant in Athens that produces home-care products was plagued by downtime, with production idled for days, when manufacturing equipment broke because manuals were in German, French and English.

The plant manager uploaded the manuals and built an AI assistant that could translate and answer questions in Greek, allowing employees to get machines back up and running faster.

The company expanded the tool to handle a variety of manuals and documents in many languages and has rolled it out to 43 manufacturing

and production sites globally. Even with success stories like that, Pappas and his team have faced frustrations in their efforts to drive more AI usage. For the first few years, Pappas says he just saw the same pool of employees—about 30% of white-collar workers—engage, but more hesitation from potential new converts.

Colgate doesn't count simple tasks, such as having AI help create PowerPoint presentations, in its statistical tracking of employee AI use. Instead, Pappas is pushing for activity like deep research and coding in Google's Gemini, ChatGPT Assistants or NotebookLM, a Google AI product that can analyze specific documents or other resources.

To reach additional workers, Colgate created an "AI ambassador" program. Twenty-four people representing every major business unit work closely with Pappas. Each of them in turn manages another 10 ambassadors within their departments.

Now, more than half of white-collar workers log "advanced" AI use weekly.

The stated goal of the technology isn't to replace workers but to 'augment them.'

Dorsey Draws Skepticism

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structural changes," Dorsey said on a call with analysts as Block's stock soared.

Not everyone is buying it. Rather than leading American corporations into a brave new future, some analysts say, he is capitalizing on a chance to slash costs at a company with excessive staffing.

What began as a company focused on card-payment systems expanded into buy-now, pay-later loans, Jay-Z's music-streaming platform and bitcoin investments. The company has improved the profitability of its core businesses, but some of its ventures are weighing on its balance sheet. Net income in 2025 fell by more than half from the prior year as a result of a one-time tax gain in 2024.

"The vast majority of these cuts were probably not due to AI," said Dan Dolev of Mizuho Americas, noting the "significant amount of bloating" in recent years.

"This isn't an AI story. It's a workforce correction wearing an AI costume," wrote Jason Karsh, a former Block employee, on X.

Inside Block, employees had already grown accustomed to layoffs—just not on this scale.

Block had gone on a hiring spree during the pandemic, when Dorsey—who was known for a hands-off leadership style—became even more absent.

Dorsey's lieutenants often clashed in his absence, leading to teams with duplicated roles and resources. The company had around 4,000 employees at the end of 2019. By the end of 2023, head count had mushroomed to nearly 13,000.

A series of missteps—including a global outage at Square—prompted Dorsey to take on a more active role at the company. He announced a large round of layoffs in late 2023 and then again in early 2025. When Dorsey announced the 40% reduction last week, Block still had around 10,000 employees.



Jack Dorsey plans to slash 40% of Square's workforce.

Dorsey has maintained that the latest cuts weren't primarily motivated by cost savings. He acknowledged in a post on X that he had "incorrectly" built two separate business structures, but that Block's hiring partly reflected the increased complexity of the company's operations.

Block is Dorsey's second stint atop a tech company. The young programmer, sporting dreadlocks and a nose ring at the time, was one of Twitter's co-founders and served as its chief executive officer until 2008, when he was pushed out amid concerns that he was distracted by his hobbies. In interviews, Dorsey has said he was ousted because he "deferred too much" to other executives.

Soon after, in 2009, he co-founded Square, the company that would go on to become Block. The idea came about after another co-founder, a coder and glassblowing artist named Jim McKelvey, couldn't sell one of his sculptural glass faucets because he couldn't accept credit cards.

To solve the problem, they created a square-shaped device that could plug into a smartphone's headphone jack and read credit cards. The company gave away the hardware and software and the system took off, particularly among small businesses.

When employees came up with the idea for Cash App in late 2012, executives wanted to kill the project in part because it felt too similar to PayPal's Venmo. Dorsey has said he kept it alive because he trusted the team leading it.

In 2015, Square prepared to go public. That same year, Dorsey took back the job as

CEO of Twitter, which was based a block away. He juggled roles at both companies and started delegating more work at Square to his deputies.

Dorsey left Twitter's leadership shortly before it was acquired in 2022 by billionaire Elon Musk.

Dorsey stepped back in as Square's full-time CEO after a global service outage in September 2023 left business owners unable to access their accounts for two days.

Rolling layoffs began soon after. Dorsey doubled down on his interest in bitcoin and announced Bitkey, a hardware bitcoin wallet device. A unit to make chips and machines for bitcoin mining soon followed.

Today, both of Block's major business units are facing pressure. Square is competing with payment platforms including Shopify and Toast, while Cash App competes with players including Apple's wallet and PayPal's Venmo.

In the past year, Dorsey has pushed his employees to use generative AI tools, according to people familiar with the matter. Employees are also expected to send Dorsey weekly updates, which he then summarizes with AI into general highlights and themes, the people said.

The depth of the layoffs announced last week were shocking to many employees. Others found solace in getting closure.

"For the past six months, the vibe at Block has been heavy with anxiety, and layoffs have been the hottest topic," Cash App engineer Zane Wang wrote in a LinkedIn post shortly after he was laid off. "Honestly, getting laid off feels more like a relief."

Who's Who of Distinguished Leaders: 2026 Honorees

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